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Interview with the Southern Vampire: Reviving a Haunted History in Contemporary Film and Television

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Interview with the Southern Vampire: Reviving a Haunted History in Contemporary Film and Television

by

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Abstract

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It is difficult to imagine a time without vampires, a fixture of Western popular culture since the nineteenth century. The vampires of today, however, are a far cry from Bram Stoker's Dracula. Stoker's creation is a monster, a metaphor for all things feared by Victorian culture. Contemporary vampires, on the other hand, are increasingly depicted as marginalized figures striving for redemption and human connection. Within this shift from monster to social outcast, a peculiar trend has emerged: vampire fiction set in the American South that deliberately addresses the region's haunted history. As mythical beings, vampires often serve as mediators for an era's particular anxieties or fears. So why does current Western society need not just sympathetic vampires but sympathetic *Southern* ones? What particular concerns do these Southern vampires negotiate? And how does a Southern locale engender this purpose?

To answer these questions, I first consider how such media engage with the Southern Gothic. Chapter one focuses on HBO's *True Blood* (2008-2014), examining how Southern vampire texts negotiate race and class structures and promote the possibility of a modern, integrated Southern society. Chapter two compares *Interview with the Vampire: The Vampire Chronicles* (Neil Jordan, 1994) and *The Originals* (The CW, 2013-Present) to explore how Southern vampires mediate feelings of collective guilt and motivate (or avoid) reparation efforts. To understand not only the elements but also the cultural import of this regionalized media trend, I next extend these readings with an examination of audience reception. Chapter three focuses on viewers of *The Originals*, surveying the diversity of audience engagement with the series as well as identifying recurring trends within that diversity. In combining all three threads of analysis, I conclude that vampire texts set in the American South perform a complex and at times paradoxical function, promoting feelings of nostalgia for an imagined South as well as engendering processes of critical self-reflection.

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Introduction

As Nina Auerbach muses in her book, *Our Vampires, Ourselves* (1995), it is difficult to imagine a time without vampires—a fixture of cinema since the silent era, a subject of English literature since the nineteenth century, and a recurring monster of folk tales since the Middle Ages. Notwithstanding their cultural immortality, it is likewise difficult to ignore that vampires currently enjoy a renaissance of sorts, particularly within the media of film and television. Characters of the fanged variety thoroughly pervade the small and silver screens. The past two years alone has seen the release of films such as *Only Lovers Left Alive* (Jim Jarmusch, 2013), *Vampire Academy* (Mark Waters, 2014), *Dracula Untold* (Gary Shore, 2014), *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* (Ana Lily Amirpour, 2014), and *What We Do in the Shadows* (Jemaine Clement, Taika Waititi, 2015), as well as ongoing television series including *The Strain* (FX, 2014-Present), *Penny Dreadful* (Showtime, 2014-Present), and *From Dusk Till Dawn: The Series* (El Rey, 2014-Present). The vampires of today, however, are often a far cry from Bram Stoker's Dracula. Stoker's creation is a monster, a metaphor for all things feared by Victorian culture. Contemporary vampires, on the other hand, are increasingly depicted as marginalized figures striving for redemption and human connection.

Within this seismic shift from monster to social outcast, a perhaps peculiar trend has emerged: a parallel rise of vampire texts set in the American South.[1] To an extent,

[1] The United States Census Bureau includes 16 states in its definition of the South, dividing them into three regions: the South Atlantic (Florida, Georgia, Maryland, North Carolina, South Carolina, Virginia, West Virginia, Delaware); the East South Central (Alabama, Kentucky, Mississippi, Tennessee); and the West South Central (Arkansas, Louisiana, Oklahoma, Texas). For the purpose of this analysis, however, my definition refers to former slave states that seceded from the United States during the Civil War. This

vampires have taken up fictional residence in the United States since the 1970s, with films such as *Martin* (George A. Romero, 1976), *Near Dark* (Kathryn Bigelow, 1987), and *Vampires* (John Carpenter, 1998). However, within the past 20 years—beginning with Neil Jordan's *Interview with the Vampire: The Vampire Chronicles* (1994), a film adaptation of Anne Rice's popular book—vampires have increasingly inhabited the South, like the northern Louisiana of *True Blood* (HBO, 2008-2014) or the small-town Virginia of *The Vampire Diaries* (The CW, 2009-Present). Furthermore, most of these texts do not just adopt a Southern locale, but also use the figure of the vampire to actively engage with the region's history. Both *True Blood* and *The Vampire Diaries,* for example, feature vampires that are former Southern elites and Confederate soldiers.

What is the motivation for this regional trend? According to Auerbach, "every age embraces the vampire it needs."[2] As mythical beings, vampires often serve as metaphorical mediators for a given era's particular anxieties or concerns. Auerbach, for example, argues that vampires during the Reagan administration potentially address questions of sexuality and fears about illness. So why does our current Western society need not just sympathetic vampires but sympathetic *Southern* vampires? My project seeks to answer this question. In looking at a selection of recent vampire films and television series set in the American South, I hope to better understand not just how these texts engage with the region and its past, but also what cultural function such

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includes: Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and Virginia. I draw this distinction not only to narrow my focus, but also because I believe these states' history of slavery greatly influences how these vampire texts function narratively as well as allegorically.

[2] Nina Auerbach, *Our Vampires, Ourselves* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 145.

representations serve. What current issues do these Southern vampires confront and negotiate? And how does a Southern locale engender this purpose?

Given the prevalence of Southern vampires in contemporary film and television, it is perhaps surprising that few scholars identify, let alone investigate, the implications of this regional trend. Overall, most recent scholarship takes up the critical approach that began in vampire studies[3] back in the 1980s, combining textual and cultural analysis to examine the vampire as metaphor. While this method certainly plays a role in my analysis in helping to explain the function of Southern vampires, it does not account for the historical and cultural significance of these issues for this particular region. Furthermore, this approach does not offer any reason as to why these texts engage with the history of the South at all. To better account for these factors in my project, I situate my analysis within the context of the Southern Gothic—the genre from which all of these texts arguably derive and consciously evoke. I also expand my methodological approach to include reception studies, conducting an ethnographic investigation of real viewers in order to enrich academic readings.

A Survey of Vampire Studies: Interpreting the Vampire as Metaphor

The first analyses to adopt the vampire-as-metaphor framework focus on pre-twentieth-century (and thus literary) examples of vampires, as in James B. Twitchell's *The Living Dead: A Study of the Vampire in Romantic Literature* (1981) and Margaret L. Carter's anthology, *Dracula: The Vampire and the Critics* (1988). David Skal moves the

[3] Vampire studies encompasses scholarship from several academic disciplines, including history, religion, philosophy, Classics, English studies, and media studies. With my project's focus on popular culture, it draws principally from the fields of English and media studies.

study into the twentieth century and shifts the medium of interest to cinema. His book, *The Monster Show: A Cultural History of Horror* (1993), explores the ways in which horror films play out social traumas such as the Cold War and the AIDS epidemic. Arguably the most important contribution to this early period of analysis, however, is Auerbach's *Our Vampires, Ourselves*. Her book looks at the history of Anglo-American culture specifically through its representations of the undead in various media. In focusing on particular periods of history, she illustrates not only the mutability of vampires over time but also their central role of personifying a particular era's fears. "They promise escape from our dull lives and the pressures of our times," she states, "but they matter because when properly understood, they make us see that our lives are implicated in theirs and our times are inescapable."[4]

Joan Gordon and Veronica Hollinger further this research in their anthology, *Blood Read: The Vampire as Metaphor in Contemporary Culture* (1997). While Auerbach surveys the vampire's transformation throughout its popular history, Gordon and Hollinger focus on one of the most significant metamorphoses of the figure in the latter twentieth century: its domestication. With the increase in narratives told from the perspective of the Other[5]—starting with Rice's novel *Interview with the Vampire* (1976)—literary and cinematic vampires progressively diminish the terror associated with the unfamiliar and engender sympathy for the monstrous outcast. As Gordon and Hollinger point out, however, "As an inevitable result of the shifting ideological

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[4] Auerbach, *Our Vampires, Ourselves*, 9.

[5] In philosophy, the term "Other" refers to those who are different from or in opposition to the identity of the Self. Considered separate from the social and political norms of dominant culture, the Other usually connotes a marginalized figure or outsider.

development of the vampire, its metaphorical charge has also been transformed, often in very complex ways."[6] In examining a variety of contemporary texts, the anthology's essays not only suggest continuities in the metaphoric tradition of vampires but also reveal the particular investments of contemporary fantasy, such as consumption and queerness.[7]

While most of this literature focuses on Anglo-American society, *Dracula, Vampires, and Other Undead Forms: Essays on Gender, Race, and Culture* (2009), edited by John Edgar Browning and Caroline Joan (Kay) Picart, looks at the popularity and cultural relevance of the Dracula figure on a more global scale. Foreign studios produce nearly three times as many cinematic depictions of Dracula as the American and British markets, and yet this significantly larger body of work remains mostly underexplored and underappreciated. To address this gap, Browning and Picart assemble essays that move the analysis of vampires beyond the conventional areas of England and the United States to also include Slovakia, Germany, China, Japan, Pakistan, and Malaysia. In doing so, the contributing scholars identify how Dracula and Dracula-like characters allow different ethnic groups and geographic regions to represent themselves and their particular movements across borders, negotiating anxieties about gender, class, and sexuality as well as race, imperialism, and cultural hybridity.

Notwithstanding the insights and developments offered by many of the essays in *Blood Read* and *Dracula, Vampires, and Other Undead Forms*, both anthologies present

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[6] Joan Gordon and Veronica Hollinger, "Introduction: The Shape of Vampires," in *Blood Read: The Vampire as Metaphor in Contemporary Culture* (Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 1997), 2.

[7] For example, see Rob Latham, "Consuming Youth: The Lost Boys Cruise Mallworld"; or Trevor Holmes, "Coming Out of the Coffin: Gay Males and Queer Goths in Contemporary Vampire Fiction."

certain limitations to this project. Gordon and Hollinger's collection, published before the turn of the twenty-first century, cannot address many of the more recent texts, such as *True Blood*. Browning and Picart's work, on the other hand, while providing a valuable transnational perspective, only draws from cinema and the figure of Dracula. Two more recent anthologies begin to address these gaps. *Open Graves, Open Minds: Representations of Vampires and the Undead from Enlightenment to the Present Day* (2013), edited by Sam George and Bill Hughes, explores the changing allegorical function of vampires since its literary inception—from the Byronic hero of John Polidori's *The Vampyre* (1819) to the "new vampire" of *Bram Stoker's Dracula* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1992) to the *doppelgängers* of *The Vampire Diaries*. Similar to Gordon and Hollinger, George and Hughes find that the breadth of their research highlights the transformation of the vampire over time from monstrous to sympathetic. It also underlines certain recurring tropes, such as optical figures and a preoccupation with epistemology.[8] As with most of the researchers adopting the vampire-as-metaphor approach, however, George and Hughes conclude that the most important trend among vampires is how they are all "fascinatingly Other."[9]

The Modern Vampire and Human Identity (2013), edited by Deborah Mutch, on the other hand, complicates this notion of Otherness to stress the humanness of contemporary vampires. As vampires become increasingly domesticated, reversing the

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[8] For example, see Jennifer H. Williams, "A Vampire Heaven: The Economics of Salvation in *Dracula* and the Twilight Saga."

[9] Sam George and Bill Hughes, "Introduction," in *Open Graves, Open Minds: Representations of Vampires and the Undead from Enlightenment to the Present Day* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), 15.

horror of Stoker's Dracula, they become less "the un-human Other" and more "the ultimate in human experience and sensation."[10] Nevertheless, vampires remain the canvas upon which we project uncertainties and societal anxieties, particularly with regards to notions of identity. As Mutch argues in the introduction, "We have tamed our monster and now, as the gulf of separation has been bridged, we imagine our society as integrated by using the Gothic to work through our fears surrounding liberalized attitudes to gender relations, sexuality, class, race, and multiculturalism."[11]

As this quote from Mutch illustrates, the vampire's allegorical purpose relies heavily upon its association with the Gothic. The vampire's relationship to the genre goes back to its literary origins: the figure first emerged in popular culture through Gothic fiction, and vampire narratives engage with many of the Gothic's conventions and thematic trends. To understand the vampire, therefore, one must also understand the Gothic. By the same token, to comprehend the particular significance of the Southern vampire, one must also comprehend the Southern Gothic. Like vampire scholarship, however, gaps remain within this latter area of Gothic research, particularly as it relates to my project.

A Survey of Gothic Studies: From Great Britain to the American South

As David Punter and Glennis Bryon outline in their book, *The Gothic* (2004), the Gothic's origin as a genre of fiction dates back to eighteenth-century Europe, chiefly Great Britain. Amid the shifting cultural values of the Age of Reason, the term Gothic—

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[10] Deborah Mutch, "Introduction: 'A Swarm of Chuffing Draculas': The Vampire in English and American Literature," in *The Modern Vampire and Human Identity* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013) 8.
[11] Mutch, "Introduction," *Modern Vampire*, 17.

which previously referred to the Goths—came to represent the barbarisms of the medieval world. In making this connotation, the Gothic likewise became the structural antithesis to the then present classical period: chaotic instead of ordered, ornate instead of pure, excessive instead of bounded. Nevertheless, society invested these associations of the Gothic with positive value; the Gothic possessed virtues that the modern world lacked. Writers such as Bishop Hurd and Thomas Percy began to invoke the Gothic to "breathe life into the culture" of eighteenth-century England, and re-establish a relationship with a forgotten period of the nation's past.[12]

By the turn of the nineteenth century and the dawn of the Romantic age, the genre continued to evolve and take on new cultural relevance. Poets such as William Blake, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and Lord Byron used the form to articulate themes of social and political repression, or express personal feelings of melancholy, guilt, and alienation. While the genre abated during the Victorian era, it experienced a sudden resurgence by the end of the nineteenth century, a period known to historians as the Decadence. As with vampires, the Gothic form served to address specific anxieties during a time of cultural crisis, with works such as Robert Louis Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886) and Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890) engaging in the era's growing fears about national, social, and psychic decay. This period likewise saw the publishing of arguably the most important modern vampire text: Stoker's *Dracula* (1897).

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[12] David Punter and Glennis Byron, "Gothic in the Eighteenth Century," in *The Gothic* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 8.

It is also during the nineteenth century that the Gothic genre migrated to the United States, with authors such as Charles Brockden Brown, Fenimore Cooper, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Edgar Allen Poe taking up the form. Leslie A. Fiedler traces the development of American literature—which he categorizes as inherently Gothic—in his seminal book, *Love and Death in the American Novel* (1966). "Our fiction is not merely in flight from the physical data of the actual world, in search of a (sexless and dim) Ideal," he writes, "it is, bewilderingly and embarrassingly, a Gothic fiction, nonrealistic and negative, sadist and melodramatic—a literature of darkness and the grotesque in a land of light and affirmation."[13] To work in an American context, however, elements of the Gothic form had to change. The United States, still a young country, boasted little written history. It likewise possessed neither an established class system nor haunted castles. As a result, the American Gothic replaced the fear of the ruined monument with that of the heathen wilderness, and the aristocrat with the savage. In other words, nature—not society—became the symbol of evil. This shift in signifier likewise altered the Gothic's underlying meaning. Rather than an "enlightened attack on a debased ruling class or entrenched superstition," the Gothic became an exposé on natural human corruption.[14] As with vampires, American Gothic fiction served to project the nation's deepest fears and guilts.

This conception of American Gothic fiction as a cultural and historical conduit continues in more recent scholarship. Teresa A. Goddu's *Gothic America: Narrative,*

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[13] Leslie A. Fiedler, "The Novel and America," in *Love and Death in the American Novel*, Revised Edition (New York: Stein and Day, 1966), 29.

[14] Leslie A. Fiedler, "Charles Brockden Brown and the Invention of the American Gothic, in "*Love and Death in the American Novel,* Revised Edition (New York: Stein and Day, 1966),160.

History, and Nation (1997) and *American Gothic: New Interventions in a National Narrative* (1998), edited by Robert K. Martin and Eric Savoy, both consider the persistence of the Gothic genre in American literature. These works extend Fiedler's argument, however, by introducing poststructuralist theories of Otherness, race, and gender into their respective analyses in order to examine the Gothic's relation to the national symbolic. Goddu argues that the American Gothic mode disrupts the national myth of new-world innocence by revealing the historical horrors and processes of racial exclusion that society represses to create and sustain such a narrative. Martin and Savoy make similar claims, stating that American Gothic fiction operates as a discursive field in which the return of the repressed Other undoes the metonymic national self.

In linking American Gothic fiction to constructions of national and personal identity, both Goddu and Martin and Savoy also make a crucial observation: the central role of the South. Goddu explains it best in her introduction. "The American Gothic is most recognizable as a regional form," she writes. "Identified with doom and gloom, the American South serves as the nation's 'Other,' becoming the repository for everything from which the nation wants to dissociate itself."[15] One might argue, based on this statement, that a majority of American Gothic fiction is essentially Southern Gothic fiction. Molly Boyd identifies numerous nineteenth-century Southern authors that present a Gothic rendering of Southern society, including George Washington Harris, Mark Twain, Charles W. Chesnutt, and obviously Poe. Most scholars, however, tend to associate the emergence of this regional form with the Southern Renaissance in the

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[15] Teresa A. Goddu, "Introduction," in *Gothic America: Narrative, History, and Nation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 3-4.

twentieth century and authors such as William Faulkner, Tennessee Williams, Cormac McCarthy, and Flannery O'Connor. And to an extent, the subgenre does begin to differentiate itself during this period, departing from the American Gothic's fear of the wilderness to demonstrate "the cultural malaise of modern alienation."[16]

In "Gothicism"—an entry in *The Companion to Southern Culture: Themes, Genres, Places, People, Movements, and Motifs* (2001), edited by Joseph M. Flora and Lucinda H. Mackethan—Boyd describes the Southern Gothic as a mode of fiction "characterized by grotesque characters and scenes, explorations of abnormal psychological states, dark humor, violence, and a sense of alienation or futility." To further regionalize these elements, Southern Gothic texts also draw from similar myths about Southern society:

> an inbred, patriarchal plantation aristocracy, built upon and haunted by a racist ethic, besieged by civilization and democracy, and, ultimately, defeated—as much by its own intransigence as by external forces; and an inbred lower class living in extreme isolation in closed communities, which are plagued by economic impoverishment, educational ignorance, religious fundamentalism, racial intolerance, genetic deformities, perverted sexuality, and unrequited violence.[17]

Punter and Byron offer a similar definition. They classify the Southern Gothic as a subgenre of the Gothic that appropriates traditional Gothic elements—emphasizing the macabre, grotesque, and violent—and combines them with concerns endemic to the American South. As a result, Southern Gothic fiction investigates madness, decay, and

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16 Molly Boyd, "Gothicism," in *The Companion to Southern Culture: Themes, Genres, Places, People, Movements, and Motifs*, eds. Joseph M. Flora and Lucinda H. Mackethan (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2001), 316.

17 Boyd, "Gothicism," 311.

the "continuing pressures of the past upon the present"[18]—similar to other Gothic works—but from a specifically Southern perspective. For example, the works of Faulkner, whom Punter and Byron consider the progenitor of the Southern Gothic, explore the lost ideal of a dispossessed Southern aristocracy and fears related to ongoing racial tensions.

Notwithstanding the current research into the American Gothic, however, the Southern Gothic remains largely underexplored, particularly as its own form. In addition, the majority of American Gothic scholarship continues to focus solely on literature. A few exceptions exist. Louis S. Gross's *Redefining the American Gothic: from* Wieland *to* Day of the Dead (1989) considers the evolution of the genre across both literature and film. More recent works, such as Helen Wheatley's *Gothic Television* (2006) or Kyle William Bishop's *American Zombie Gothic: The Rise and Fall (and Rise Again) of the Walking Dead in Popular Culture* (2010), on the other hand, look more closely at certain visual texts. Nevertheless, examinations of the Southern Gothic—particularly in regards to film and television—remain shamefully scarce.

As these overviews of vampire and Gothic research illustrate, the two areas share many of the same analytical trends and conclusions. Scholarship views both vampires and the Gothic as elastic and generically unstable. Both fields likewise examine their respective subjects as cultural signifiers, linking the past with the present in order to reveal certain fears and anxieties. The similarities between the two sets of scholarship also extend into their gaps in research. Aside from a few examples, like Auerbach or

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[18] David Punter and Glennis Byron, "William Faulkner (1897-1962)," in *The Gothic* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 116.

Goddu, vampire and Gothic literature largely resist historical or localized readings, favoring psychoanalytic interpretations instead. Despite these overlaps, however, few scholars connect the two fields. Even fewer focus on the Southern Gothic and non-literary forms.

EMERGING TRENDS: CONTEMPORARY VAMPIRE MEDIA AS REGIONAL FICTION

Stacy Abbott's *Celluloid Vampires: Life After Death in the Modern World* (2007) traces the development of the vampire on screen, from *Nosferatu* (F. W. Murnau, 1992) to *Underworld: Evolution* (Len Wiserman, 2006). In paying particular attention to representations of the modern American vampire, she discovers regional trends among this canon; however, she completely overlooks the South. Instead, Abbott focuses on the "urban" vampires of New York and Los Angeles. She likewise removes the crucial role of the South from her discussion of the American Gothic. In her invocation of Poe, for example, she detaches his foundational ties to the Southern Gothic by referring to him as the "master of American Gothic horror" and using him to examine Los Angeles-set vampire films of the 1980s and 1990s.[19]

Evangelia Kindinger does not display the same oversight; however, her focus remains entirely upon literature. In her article "Reading Supernatural Fiction as Regional Fiction: of 'Vamps,' 'Supes,' and 'Places that 'Suck,'" she recognizes how contemporary vampires increasingly inhabit specific places, including the American South. Analyzing three popular vampire novels, Kindinger examines how each text's setting relates to and

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[19] Stacy Abbott, "Los Angeles: Fangs, Gangs, and Vampireland," in *Celluloid Vampires: Life After Death in the Modern World* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2007), 183.

impacts the vampire's cultural significance. "What are the effects of such a union," she asks, "to regionalize the monster or to represent regionalism as monstrous?"[20] Kindinger concludes that both occur. As contemporary vampires become more and more humanized, authors' rooting of these characters in a particular location serves as a technique of domestication. These vampires' "desire to settle down, for instance, underlines the notion of the 'new' vampire who is more the 'neighbor next door' than an exotic, foreign predator."[21] By depicting regions like the South as home to the Other, however, these texts also represent regional communities as non-normative, thereby upholding their marginalized position in relation to American national identity.

True Blood*: Investigating Vampires and Southern Gothic* (2012), edited by Brigid Cherry, moves the discussion beyond literary examples. The anthology assembles a number of essays that consider the vampire's Gothic heritage, and how the HBO program uses a "gothic sensibility of the South" to reconstruct notions of the Gothic Romance as well as engage in issues such as race, class, and sexuality.[22] Caroline Ruddell and Cherry's chapter, "More Than Cold and Heartless: The Southern Gothic Milieu of *True Blood*," for example, looks at how the show plays with its Southern landscape—its humid weather and Spanish moss-covered forests—to create a Southern Gothic hybrid that problematizes the binary of light and dark. Notwithstanding the insights of this essay—and the title of the book—the anthology as a whole treats the relation between vampires

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[20] Evangelia Kindinger, "Reading Supernatural Fiction as Regional Fiction: of 'Vamps,' 'Supes,' and Places that 'Suck,'" *Kultur und Geschlecht* 1, no. 8 (2011): 11.

[21] Kindinger, "Reading Supernatural Fiction," 12.

[22] Brigid Cherry, "Before the Night Is Through: *True Blood* as Cult TV," in True Blood*: Investigating Vampires and Southern Gothic* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2012), 9.

and the Southern Gothic in *True Blood* more as an anomaly than evidence of a recurring media trend. As a result, it cannot speak towards the larger cultural significance of Southern vampires nor the reasons for their current popularity.

Victoria Amador's "The Gothic Louisiana of Charlaine Harris and Anne Rice"—the penultimate chapter in Mutch's *The Modern Vampire and Human Identity*—offers perhaps the most promising and relevant examination of vampires and the Southern Gothic. She argues that the Southern states, and Louisiana in particular, operate as complex sites of contradictions—racial and ethnic melting pots that are both simultaneously primitive and sophisticated. As such, the South becomes a favorable spot for not only the blurring of identity boundaries but also Gothic physical and psychological imagery. Vampire texts set in the South, such as *True Blood* and *Interview with the Vampire*, therefore, draw from Southern Gothic tropes to "connect their fictional present to an antebellum past" and ultimately allegorize the destruction of Caucasian hegemony.[23] *Interview with the Vampire*, for example, uses the figure of the vampire to illustrate the horrors of slavery. Louis de Pointe de Lac owns a plantation in his human life. As a vampire he thus haunts postbellum America and reminds it of its slave-owning past. *True Blood*, set in the twenty-first century, on the other hand, presents a more integrated Southern life that still struggles to maintain separate racial identities. While its vampires hope to join human society—or "mainstream," as the show calls it—they nevertheless seek to preserve that which makes them different.

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[23] Victoria Amador, "The Gothic Louisiana of Charlaine Harris and Anne Rice," in *The Modern Vampire and Human Identity*, ed. Deborah Mutch (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 170.

Amador's piece offers a significant development in both vampire and Gothic scholarship, particularly as it relates to my analysis. Her examination of *Interview with the Vampire* and *True Blood* proposes specific allegorical purposes of vampire texts set in the South, and how such texts employ Southern Gothic tropes to convey these meanings. As one essay in one book, however, Amador can only begin to fill the critical gap that exists in vampire scholarship. While my analysis cannot provide the ultimate intervention any more than Amador's, it does hope to contribute to and broaden the critical discussion that Amador introduces, demonstrate the importance of this research to the fields of vampire and Gothic studies, and open up the subject for further inquiry.

PROJECT OUTLINE: CONDUCTING A SOUTHERN VAMPIRE INTERVENTION

One of the most important ways my analysis seeks to perform these tasks is through methodology. Notwithstanding her insights, Amador's approach does not extend beyond textual analysis. As a result, while she explores what function Southern vampires serve, she does not consider why Western society needs them to perform it. To better understand this in my study, I combine textual analysis with reception studies. Examinations of audience reception benefit academic readings in two significant ways. First, they expand upon our understanding of particular texts by revealing a diverse range of media engagements and viewer interpretations. An academic and a fan can read the same text in two very different ways. And second, these examinations also challenge assumptions about the audience's viewing experience and competence. Textual analyses often draw conclusions about a hypothetical audience, but only through the study of actual viewers can we begin to comprehend the complexity of their media interactions.

To be fair, vampire scholarship is not completely unfamiliar with methods of audience reception. Recognizing the vampire's current surge in popularity, researchers over the past decade are beginning to look more critically at viewers. These few attempts, however, predominately analyze either modes of consumption or fandom, especially with regards to youth culture.[24] My analysis, on the other hand, investigates the reception of these texts in order to understand how the audience interprets and make use of the vampire's metaphorical function. I want to extend my findings beyond my own textual analysis, my own readings. In other words, I believe that in conducting audience research, my conclusions will achieve greater depth and complexity.

Given this dual approach, my research questions are likewise two-fold. First, I seek to answer how contemporary vampire media set in the American South engage with the Southern Gothic. In what ways do these texts evoke the genre and unpack its particular concerns? Chapter one approaches this question by examining how Southern vampire texts reconcile race and class structures. Conducting my own analysis of HBO's *True Blood* (2008-2014), extending as well as challenging existing scholarship, I find that Southern vampires provide an important (and, at times, contradictory) space in which to work through certain social anxieties and demonstrate the possibility of and need for an integrated Southern society. Chapter two furthers this investigation by addressing a concept long underexplored in vampire studies: guilt. Focusing on *Interview with the Vampire: The Vampire Chronicles* (Neil Jordan, 1994) and *The Originals* (The CW,

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[24] For example, see Mellissa A. Click, Jennifer Stevens Aubrey, and Elizabeth Behm-Morawitz, eds., *Bitten by* Twilight*: Youth Culture, Media, and the Vampire Franchise*; or Katherine Marie Kapurch, "Unconditionally and at the Heart's Core: *Twilight*, Neo-Victorian Melodrama, and Popular Girl Culture."

2013-Present), I apply a historical and sociological framework of individual and collective guilt to explore how the Southern vampire mediates feelings of remorse and encourages acts of reparation. In comparing the two texts, I conclude that Southern vampire media perform important cultural work, using the figure's experience of guilt to address varied constructions of regional, collective guilt as a functional emotion.

Second, I hope to understand not only the elements of this regional trend but also its cultural import. How does the audience make sense of these texts, individually and collectively? Chapter three tackles this question by focusing on the audience of *The Originals*, surveying the diversity of viewer engagements with the series as well as identifying recurring trends within that diversity. To perform this analysis, I implement the multi-sited ethnographic approach outlined by Christine Hine in her article, "Towards ethnography of television on the Internet: A mobile strategy for exploring mundane interpretive activities." Seeking to explore the audience's fluid, converging connection with media texts, Hine uses a simple Google search to find and scrutinize a variety of field sites. Through my application of this method, I discover that a divide exists between academic and audience interpretations of *The Originals*, with most viewers not expressly responding to how the series engages with Southern Gothic concerns.

My conclusion combines these threads of analysis to address the overarching question that drives this project: Why does current Western society need sympathetic Southern vampires? Undoubtedly, they serve a number of purposes—cultural metaphor, pure entertainment, source of horror. But as Gothic allegorical characters, vampires

primarily represent "something repressed which recurs."[25] In other words, they force us to relive the past. Unlike other Gothic figures, however, vampires also allow us to reconcile with that history and move on. How is this role both beneficial and potentially problematic? In using vampires to directly confront the horrors of the past, do we obfuscate one of the most critical truths—that humans committed these crimes—by placing the blame on mystical monsters? Be that as it may, I consider this regionalized trend a significant development in vampire media, one that takes the allegorical function of the fanged figure to an entirely new level. Consequently, I hope my research will not only shed light on an underexplored subject, but also provoke further inquiry as this trend continues to develop.

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[25] Sigmund Freud, quoted in Robert K. Martin and Eric Savoy, eds., *American Gothic: New Interventions in a National Narrative* (Iowa City, IA: University of Iowa Press, 1998), 9.

Chapter One: Reviving (and Staking) the Old Southern Patriarch: Racial and Social Difference in HBO's *True Blood*

With one visit to New Orleans, it is easy to understand why so many vampires call the Crescent City home.[26] Much like its immortal inhabitants, New Orleans appears almost trapped in time. Tourists explore the French Quarter in mule-drawn carriages; while bar patrons gather in an eighteenth-century building allegedly once owned by a pirate. Moreover, the city feels marked by mysticism and death, with the lasting influence of voodoo culture and the imposing presence of New Orleans' many cemeteries—locally known as "cities of the dead." Perhaps most importantly, New Orleans boasts a vampire's indestructibility. Despite plague, great fires, two Battles of New Orleans, and countless hurricanes, the city endures to *laissez les bons temps rouler* another day.

Scholars David Punter and Glennis Byron agree. In discussing the Louisiana setting of Anne Rice's 1976 novel *Interview with the Vampire*, they comment, "Presented as a cosmopolitan part of the new world but simultaneously somehow ancient, imbued with history and decadent [*sic*], New Orleans becomes the ideal Gothic space for a new vampire fiction."[27] The Crescent City offers itself as the perfect backdrop for vampire texts, however, not only because it is a Gothic space but also because it is, more importantly, a *Southern* Gothic one.

With its diverse cultural heritage as a port city, shaped by the native Choctaw population, two European colonizers, Caribbean refugees, German and Irish immigrants,

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[26] Several authors have examined the alleged non-fictional vampires of New Orleans. For example, see Karyn Zweifel, *Southern Vampires: 13 Deep-Fried Bloodcurdling Tales*; or John Edgar Browning, "Conversations with Real Vampires."

[27] David Punter and Glennis Byron, "Anne Rice, *Interview with the Vampire* (1976)," in *The Gothic* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 244.

Acadian émigrés, West African slaves, and finally American settlers; the discriminatory class system that developed as a result of this ethnic diversity; its varied landscape, alternating between Spanish moss-covered trees and uninhabitable swampland; and its legacy of slavery, New Orleans evokes the very essence of the Southern Gothic. As such, narratives set in Louisiana powerfully engage with the subgenre's particular concerns, or how "the past, even dead, *especially dead*, could continue to work harm."[28]

Undead themselves, no figure navigates the anxieties of the Southern Gothic better than the vampire. In blurring the boundaries between life and death, human and monster, the vampire adeptly maps the contradictory tensions of the American South, or its "duality of self-image."[29] In addition, the figure's rhetorical function allows it to signify—at times simultaneously—a variety of subject positions, from social outcast and racial minority to aristocrat and enforcer of white hegemony. Within a Louisiana setting, therefore, vampires and the Southern Gothic enjoy an almost symbiotic relationship. New Orleans provides the ideal Gothic space, blending the past with the present. And vampires offer the perfect means through which to interrogate the Southern Gothic tensions that characterize the region.

In this chapter, I begin to connect vampires and the Southern Gothic by examining a topic central to both areas of research: the construction and negotiation of race and class structures. With the importance of identity and difference to vampire and Gothic studies alike, it is perhaps no surprise that considerations of race and class appear

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[28] Leslie A. Fiedler, "Charles Brockden Brown and the Invention of the American Gothic, in "*Love and Death in the American Novel,* Revised Edition (New York: Stein and Day, 1966),131.

[29] Victoria Amador, "The Gothic Louisiana of Charlaine Harris and Anne Rice," in *The Modern Vampire and Human Identity,* ed. Deborah Mutch (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 166.

frequently within their respective literatures. But how does the intersection of these two fields within vampire texts set in Louisiana complicate our understanding? And how do Southern vampires serve to unpack these concerns—not only in terms of Self and Other, but also in terms of power relations and social integration?

To answer these questions, I will conduct my own textual analysis of *True Blood* (HBO, 2008-2014). Principally set in Louisiana, the series deliberately evokes the aesthetics and aims of the Southern Gothic through its characters, narrative, and mise-en-scène. Scholars such as Michelle J. Smith and Victoria Amador begin to weigh the implications of race and class in *True Blood*, but fail to qualify the series as part of a regionalized media trend. By using *True Blood* as a case study within this context, I hope to extend as well as challenge their findings, understanding how vampire texts set in the American South operate independently as well as collectively. I conclude that, contrary to Smith and Amador's respective arguments, the vampires of *True Blood* both transgress and uphold racial hierarchies. Nevertheless, Southern Gothic vampire texts like *True Blood* provide an important space to work through particular anxieties and demonstrate the possibility of and need for an integrated society.

FORM VERSUS FUNCTION: CONNECTING THE SOUTHERN GOTHIC AND VAMPIRES

As with the European and American Gothic genres, the Southern Gothic seeks to revive a repressed past. To accomplish this, it appropriates traditional Gothic tropes and combines them with the peculiarities of the American South—replacing the ruined castle with the plantation house, the virtuous heroine with the Southern belle. As a result, the subgenre examines Gothic concerns from a regional perspective, as Punter and Byron

outline: madness, decay, despair, and the "continuing pressures of the past upon the present."[30] Given the history of the South—one often represented as haunted by violence, suffering, loss, fear, and guilt—these repressed anxieties often relate to issues of race and social class. Punter and Byron, for example, interpret the "continuing pressures of the past upon the present" in terms of the fallen ideals of a dispossessed Southern aristocracy and the continuation of racial conflict. Amador, on the other hand, argues how, in the Southern Gothic's re-imagination of European Gothic tropes, "issues of social class [are] intensified and complicated by the tragedy and legacy of slavery."[31]

In "The Ghost of Race: Edgar Allan Poe and the Southern Gothic," Teresa A. Goddu goes so far as to argue that the American literary tradition contains the terror of race exclusively to the South. "More perceived idea than social reality, the imaginary South functions as the nation's 'dark' Other," she contends. "By so closely associating the Gothic with the South"—not to mention defining the region strictly in terms of its racial history—"the American literary tradition neutralizes the Gothic threat to national identity."[32] While Goddu makes this point in order to advocate for an American Gothic tradition that questions regional stereotypes and acknowledges the pervasiveness of white racism, her analysis nevertheless stresses the importance of racial discourses to the American South and how the Gothic serves to mediate these discussions.

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[30] David Punter and Glennis Byron, "William Faulkner (1897-1962)," in *The Gothic* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 116.

[31] Amador, "Gothic Louisiana," 166.

[32] Teresa A. Goddu, "The Ghost of Race: Edgar Allan Poe and the Southern Gothic," in *Gothic America: Narrative, History, and Nation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 76.

Long functioning as both metaphor and site of identification, the vampire has similarly been defined in terms of race and class—arguably since its literary beginnings. Lord Ruthven of John Polidori's *The Vampyre* (1819) marks a departure from the folkloric monster and establishes a new dominant archetype: the Byronic vampire, "a dark angel bringing both love and death, yearning for redemption and ultimately finding none."[33] As a British nobleman whose "irresistible powers of seduction" and "licentious habits" make him a danger to society,[34] however, Ruthven also serves to illustrate the wickedness of the white upper class. "Above everything else," Conrad Aquilina posits in "The deformed transformed; or, from bloodsucker to Byronic hero—Polidori and the literary vampire," "Polidori made the vampire dignified, in a perverse kind of way."[35] As Ken Gelder comments in his book *Reading the Vampire* (1994), this characterization performs a kind of social commentary. Ruthven moves unnoticed within the leisured classes because society itself is vampiric, he argues; "its aristocratic representatives prey upon 'the people' wherever they go."[36] And while Polidori may have created this character out of personal animosity for his rival and traveling companion, Lord Byron—

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33 Conrad Aquilana, "The deformed transformed; or, from bloodsucker to Byronic hero—Polidori and the literary vampire," in *Open Graves, Open Minds: Representations of Vampires and the Undead from Enlightenment to the Present Day,* eds. Sam George and Bill Hughes (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), 28.

34 John Polidori, *The Vampyre: A Tale*, in *Three Vampire Tales*, ed. Anne Williams (Boston: Wadsworth, 2003), 72.

35 Aquilana, "Deformed transformed," 31.

36 Ken Gelder, "Vampires in Greece: Byron and Polidori," in *Reading the Vampire* (London: Routledge, 1994), 34.

the inspiration for Ruthven—he nevertheless initiates "a long line of haughty aristocratic bloodsuckers, tinged with ancient and decadent grandeur."[37]

While the Byronic vampire endures, in film and television as well as literature, the fanged figure does not always embody white hegemony. With the vampire's boundary-blurring position as outcast, the figure can also represent configurations of the Other. The racial and social implications of this function become more varied and pronounced with the development of vampire studies, and particularly the field's critical interpretation of the vampire in metaphoric and metonymic terms. As Joan Gordon and Veronica Hollinger state in the introduction to their anthology *Blood Read: The Vampire as Metaphor in Contemporary Culture* (1997), "While it is obvious that the power of the vampire is at once immediate and direct—the grisly nightmares it can evoke are visceral, not rational—it is also true that any treatment of the figure of the Other is an ideological moment that can usually be interpreted for political and cultural significance."[38] Franco Moretti, for example, equates Dracula with capitalism. Gelder and Jimmie Cain, on the other hand, read the character as anti-Semitic and anti-Slavic, respectively.

Perhaps the significance of race and class to both Southern Gothic and vampire studies explains why—notwithstanding the research gaps regarding Southern vampire texts outlined in the introduction—investigations of these concerns frequently appear within the limited scholarship that does exist. In her piece "The postmodern vampire in

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[37] Sam George, Sam and Bill Hughes, "Introduction," in *Open Graves, Open Minds: Representations of Vampires and the Undead from Enlightenment to the Present Day* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), 10.

[38] Joan Gordon and Veronica Hollinger, "Introduction: The Shape of Vampires," in *Blood Read: The Vampire as Metaphor in Contemporary Culture* (Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 1997), 2.

'post-race' America: HBO's *True Blood*," for example, Michelle J. Smith argues that the television series uses its sympathetic vampires to blur the line between human and monster, good and evil. And in thus removing the "us" and "them" binary opposition, *True Blood* likewise obscures the boundaries that define racial and sexual difference for which vampires are traditionally emblematic. "What may be interpreted as a range of racial identities," Smith contends, "is exposed among the inhabitants of the small Southern town of Bon Temps, Louisiana—the vampire, werewolf, werepanther, fairy, witch, and shapeshifter—obliterating the very concept of normality against which to define deviance or monstrosity."[39] As a result, Smith finds that *True Blood*—rather than negotiating fears related to racial integration—promotes an array of racial groups and disparages against those who remain intolerant of difference.

While Smith selects a Southern vampire text as the subject of her study, she largely does not consider the significance of the series' Southern Gothic milieu in her analysis. Victoria Amador, on the other hand, deliberately makes this connection in two separate pieces. In "Blacks and Whites, Trash and Good Country People in *True Blood*," she argues that the series' vampires illustrate the evolution of the South with respect to class as well as civil rights, "demonstrating the slow but inexorable shifts in tolerance and acceptance within contemporary Southern society."[40] In other words, the racial confusion surrounding the vampire serves to simultaneously depict the lasting pervasiveness of

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[39] Michelle J. Smith, "The postmodern vampire in 'post-race' America: HBO's *True Blood*," in *Open Graves, Open Minds: Representations of Vampires and the Undead from Enlightenment to the Present Day*, eds. Sam George and Bill Hughes (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), 193.

[40] Victoria Amador, "Blacks and Whites, Trash and Good Country People in *True Blood*," in *True Blood: Investigating Vampires and Southern Gothic*, ed. Brigid Cherry (London: I. B. Tauris, 2012), 125.

racism as well as usher Louisiana into an era of twenty-first century modernity. Amador makes a similarly idealistic argument about integration in her piece "The Gothic Louisiana of Charlaine Harris and Anne Rice." She finds that *True Blood* utilizes the Gothic atmosphere of Louisiana to blur the boundaries of race, gender, and sexuality—and in so doing problematize its vampires. As a result, Amador argues, the figure of the vampire functions as a trope for "the destruction of Caucasian hegemony, for the integration of minority populations, the development of a multi-racial society, and for the destruction of the myth of possible racial, social, or class purity."[41]

Smith and Amador provide meaningful insights regarding the implications of vampire texts set in the American South; however, their scholarship presents certain limitations. First, both authors publish before the conclusion of *True Blood* in August 2014. As a result, they are unable to analyze the series as a whole, or the significance of its series finale in particular. Second, neither Smith nor Amador considers the program as part of a regionalized media trend. By placing my examination within this context, I hope to draw conclusions about the broader cultural function Southern vampire serve, particularly with regards to their participation in discourses on race and class. Lastly, both authors argue that *True Blood* illustrates the potential for an integrated, Southern society, but I question the degree to which the series' vampires truly engender such modern ideals. Vampires do not always function as agents of progressivism. On the contrary, there exists a lasting tradition linking vampires to conservatism and white

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[41] Amador, "Gothic Louisiana," 175.

hegemony, with characters such as Edward Cullen in *The Twilight Saga* franchise expressing a desire to reclaim the chivalric customs of the past.

True Blood: The Archetypal Plantation Story…with Vampires

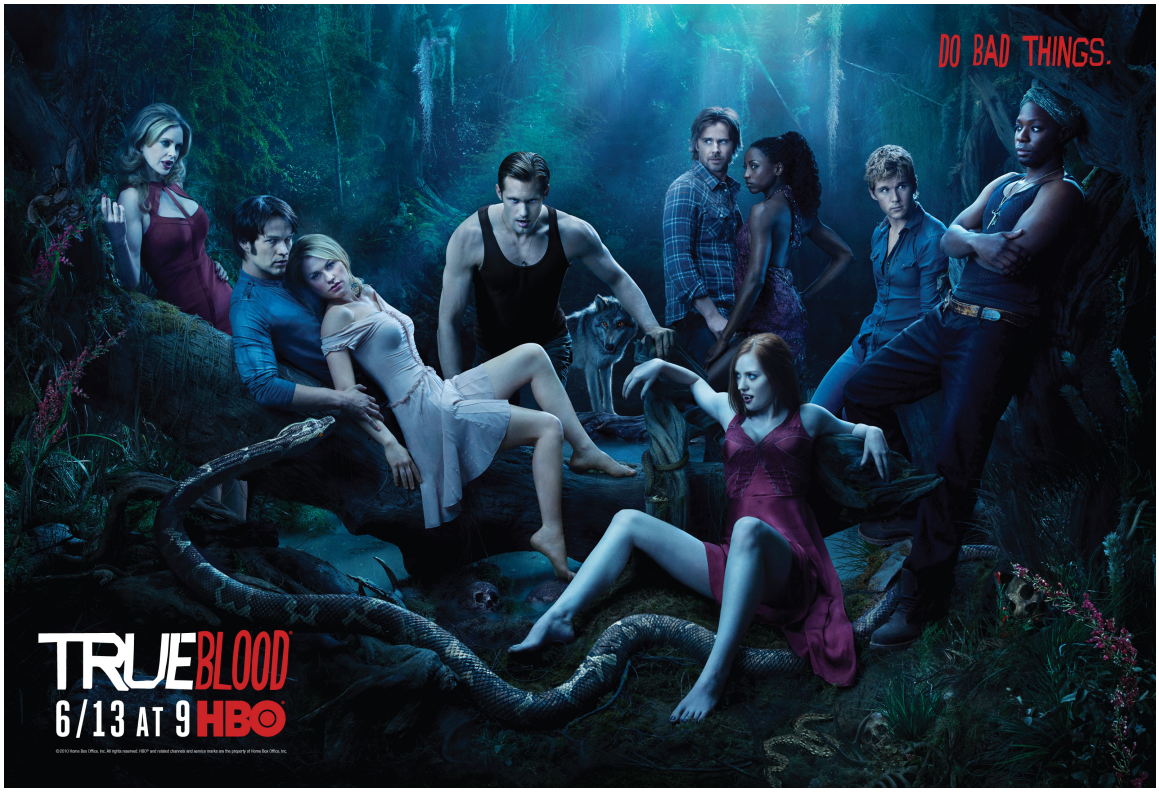

Figure 1: Promotional photo for season four of HBO's *True Blood*.

Adapted from the novels by Charlaine Harris, *True Blood* follows the life and loves of Sookie Stackhouse (Anna Paquin), a telepathic waitress from Bon Temps, Louisiana. The series begins with vampires "coming out of the coffin," announcing their presence to the world. No longer hiding in the shadows, vampires seek to live amongst humans and receive basic civil rights. Many in Sookie's small Southern community are not happy to learn that supernatural creatures walk among them, reacting with suspicion and fear. Sookie, on the other hand, welcomes the news. Much an outcast herself because

of her telepathy, she relishes in getting to know a fellow outsider. Sookie soon begins dating vampire Bill Compton (Stephen Moyer), a Confederate soldier and antebellum resident of Bon Temps who just moved back into his former home. Sookie's growing proximity to vampires and the supernatural world, however, increasingly puts her life at risk, not only from supernatural creatures who wish to control or harm her but also from the humans who violently condemn her romantic attachments to the undead. As the array of human and super-human beings living in Bon Temps struggles to coexist, Sookie considers the inherent sacrifice of vampire relationships and whether or not she can survive such a connection to darkness.

As Evangelia Kindinger points out in her article "Reading Supernatural Fiction as Regional Fiction: of 'Vamps,' 'Supes,' and Places that 'Suck,'" *True Blood* personifies the archetypal plantation story—if from a Gothic perspective. Sookie resembles the Southern belle living on a wealthy plantation, looking for a noble, Southern gentleman to fall in love with her. The series makes a few changes, though. In *True Blood*, "the Southern belle resides in a decaying house and has mind-reading, supernatural abilities," Kindinger comments. "Her gentleman is a vampire."[42] *True Blood* firmly roots itself within the Southern Gothic, however, in ways that extend beyond this Gothic transformation of traditional Southern literary characters and narratives. By making Louisiana a home for vampires, the series also purposely engages with the subgenre's particular concerns. After vampires reveal their existence, they quite literally force society to confront a previously repressed past. And within the American South, this

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[42] Evangelia Kindinger, "Reading Supernatural Fiction as Regional Fiction: of 'Vamps,' 'Supes,' and Places that 'Suck,'" *Kultur und Geschlecht* 1, no. 8 (2011): 8-9.

collision results in addressing the region's complex history of slavery, prejudice, discrimination, and decay—a difficult and at times painful task. Nevertheless, with its portrayal of Bon Temps as "a place of plurality, a community in which vampires and humans of all races and sexualities live together,"[43] *True Blood* conveys the possibility of an all-inclusive society. Whether the series realizes this ideal of integration, however, remains up for debate.

True Blood first establishes its connection between vampires and the Southern Gothic through its main titles, produced by creative agency Digital Kitchen. Mixing images of wilderness, religion, sex, violence, and death, the sequence visually enacts the contradictions and tensions that characterize the series' Louisiana setting. Explains Rama Allen, Digital Kitchen's lead designer:

> This delicate balance of the sacred and profane coexisting creates powerful imagery. Editorially, we collided the seething behind-the-curtains sexuality of the South into the fist-pounding spirituality of Pentecostal healings to viscerally expose the conflict we saw in the narrative of the show. Holy rollers flirt with perversion while godless creatures seek redemption.[44]

In doing so, the opening titles likewise situate the vampire as racial, sexual, and social outcast. The sequence makes this identification particularly evident with the image of a marquee sign bearing the words "God hates fangs," referencing the homophobic sentiment "God hates fags." Consequently, the main title sequence not only establishes the deep aesthetic ties between *True Blood* and the Southern Gothic, but also offers the

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43 Kingdinger, "Reading Supernatural Fiction," 18.

44 Rama Allen, quoted in "*True Blood*," Watch the Titles, http://watchthetitles.com/articles/00131-True_Blood.

figure of the vampire as the site upon which the series will project and negotiate Southern Gothic concerns.

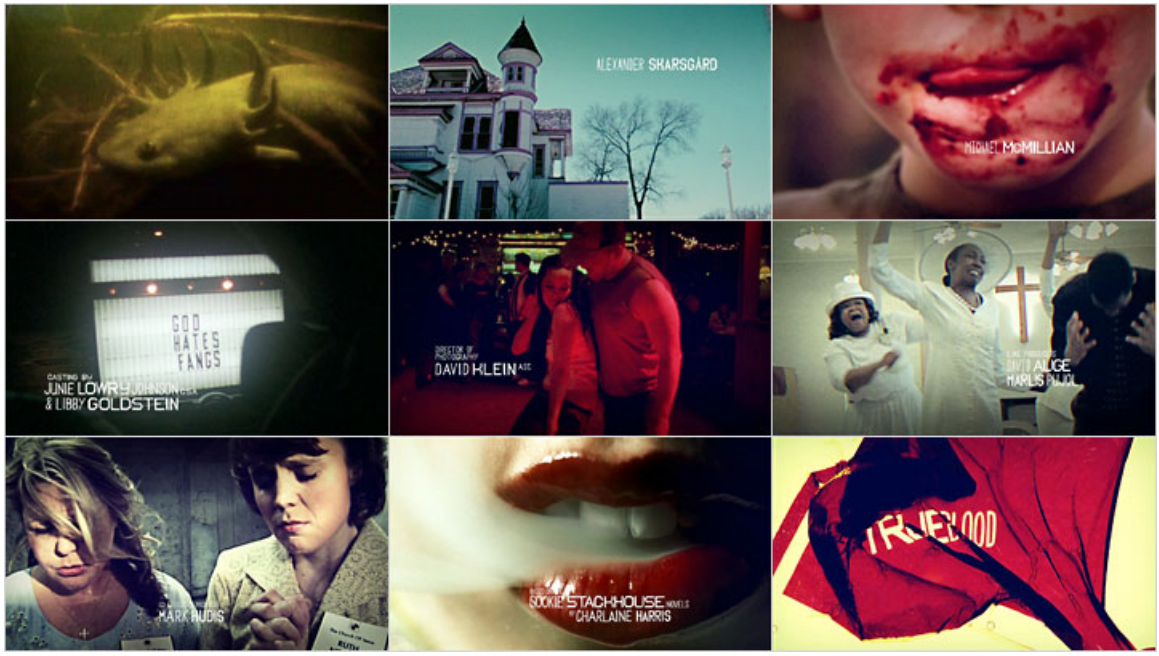

Figure 2: Stills from *True Blood*'s opening title sequence.[45]

Over the course of the series' seven seasons, the vampire's role as Southern Gothic mediator becomes exceedingly complex, particularly within the discourses of race and class. While Nina Auerbach's *Our Vampires, Ourselves* (1995) identifies the vampire's adaptability across generations, describing the alacrity with which the figure shapes itself "to personal and national moods,"[46] the continually shifting subjectivities of vampires on *True Blood* reveal just how mutable the character can really be.

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45 "*True Blood*," Watch the Titles, http://watchthetitles.com/articles/00131-True_Blood.

46 Nina Auerbach, *Our Vampires, Ourselves* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 5.

SOUTHERN VAMPS: FROM MARGINALIZED OTHERS TO AGENTS OF HEGEMONY

At the outset of the series, the vampires seem to represent the racially and socially marginalized. In their efforts to join mainstream society, vampires face immense discrimination from humans. State laws restrict vampire private businesses and vampire-human relationships, forbidding the undead and living from marrying. And militant religious groups such as the Fellowship of the Sun devote themselves to vampires' extinction, promoting anti-vampire politics and committing hate crimes. As Amador and others point out,[47] one can easily draw comparisons between vampires' fight for social acceptance and equality under the law with the real-life struggles of the civil and LGBTQ rights movements. And from this interpretation, we might also see the vampire as symbolic of those who do not embody whiteness or heteronormativity.

In a Southern Gothic milieu, the vampire's performance of racial and social Other naturally takes on a layered significance. More than challenging the viewer's own prejudice and ignorance, it also illustrates the "continuing pressures of the past" that Punter and Byron describe—specifically, the continuance of race- and class-based hostilities. Notwithstanding the shifts towards tolerance and acceptance in the American South, racist currents still pervade contemporary society. In casting the vampire as racial and social Other, *True Blood* reveals the repressed anxieties associated with the past: fears of racial impurity, integration, miscegenation, and difference. Unlike other pieces of Gothic fiction—like *Dracula* (1897)—that situate the vampire as Other, however, *True Blood* does not marginalize the vampire in an attempt to orchestrate the triumph of the

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[47] For example, see Phil Dyess-Nugent, "*True Blood* became the wildest fantasy the gay rights movement could ask for."

social order. Instead, the discrimination enacted against vampires serves to show what continues to be wrong with the social order.

True to their Byronic roots, however, the vampires on *True Blood* do not always reflect the Other. They also enact hegemony. Almost all of the vampires we meet embody whiteness. While a preponderance of white protagonists certainly reflects European Gothic tropes, "it also reflects traditional Southern power constructs," as Amador points out.[48] Furthering this claim, many of the vampires hold positions of status within their community. Eric Northman (Alexander Skarsgård), another of Sookie's vampire love interests, bears all of the Aryan features of his Viking background. (As a human, Eric lived in Sweden during the tenth century.) He also serves as one of the sheriffs of Louisiana, giving him dominion over other vampires in a particular area. Bill attains an even higher rank within the vampire regime: King of Louisiana, the senior authority in the state. Notwithstanding the discrimination they experience, therefore, the vampires on *True Blood* possess a significant amount of agency and control.

Amador nevertheless argues that the vampires show a relative lack of prejudice, evidenced by their impartial feeding habits: accepting any person, no matter their race, gender, or sexuality. She seems to overlook, however, that the vampires on *True Blood* remain predators. And like Lord Ruthven, this exploitative behavior stems from vampires' belief in their own superiority over both humans and other supernatural creatures. As a result, the vampires act as perpetrators of racial discrimination as often as they are victims of it. Eric keeps a store of humans, ready to eat, chained up in his

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[48] Amador, "Gothic Louisiana," 171.

basement. Others, sickened by vampires' attempts to coexist with humans, launch the Sanguinista movement. Essentially an extremist faction, Sanguinista vampires consider humans nothing more than food, and relationships with them an abomination.

Just as with *True Blood*'s casting of the vampire as racial and social Other, its portrayal of the vampire as white hegemony takes on new meaning within the series' Southern Gothic context. As agents rather than victims of discrimination, the vampires continue to illustrate the fear of racial conflict and integration, only from the opposite perspective. And while the series still does not approve of this racist and elitist attitude, it thoroughly complicates our interpretation of it by nevertheless associating Bill and Eric—two of the most central and beloved vampires on the show—with the Sanguinista movement in some way. As a result, *True Blood* uses its vampires to show a region still haunted by the legacy of slavery through not only the continuance of racial hostilities but also the lost ideals of a dispossessed Southern aristocracy. With the outcome of the Civil War and the onset of Reconstruction, the Southern ruling class remained "trapped in structures that had lost their authority but not their power."[49] The vampires on *True Blood* experience a similar disconnect, as they try to reconcile the belief in their superiority with the apparent need to identify and coexist with those they consider inferior.

Both Smith and Amador seem to view the shifting subjectivity of vampires on *True Blood*—from racial Other to white aristocrat—as evidence of the series' portrayal of a potentially integrated Southern society that accepts difference. Smith argues that—in contrast to traditional Gothic fiction, which expresses a fear of racial diversity—"*True*

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[49] Allan Lloyd-Smith, *American Gothic Fiction: An Introduction* (New York: Continuum, 2004), 121.

Blood gradually exposes so many metaphoric racial identities that the privileging of non-supernatural human identity becomes impossible, unsettling the Self/Other dichotomy on which vampire fiction once relied."[50] Amador comes to a similar conclusion. "The series portrays a society in which Black and White humans have found a comfortable co-existence," she surmises. And while this may imply a utopian ideal of American multiculturalism, one can argue that it nevertheless represents the Southern communities that have successfully "moved beyond race as a primary determinant of personal/interpersonal boundaries."[51]

CONFEDERATES AND CONFEDERATE VAMPIRES: REVISITING AN IMAGINED PAST

While *True Blood*'s Bon Temps certainly boasts an incredibly diverse community, and reveals its ultimate desire for inclusivity in its struggle towards integration without assimilation, I question to what degree the vampires actually enact cultural progressivism. Despite their embodiment of multiple racial and social subject positions, the power associated with their predatory nature naturally aligns them with hegemony. No matter a vampire's attachment to a human, the latter will always remain the former's prey. Furthermore, as symbols of the past living in the present, vampires keep the region's history—and its many fears and anxieties—alive. Bill is a figure from the nineteenth century unnaturally existing in the twenty-first. Consequently, how can the American South truly move into an era of modernity, as Amador claims, when the

50 Smith, "The post-modern vampire," 201.
51 Amador, "Gothic Louisiana," 174.

atmosphere of Confederacy lingers through the figure of the vampire? As Southern Gothic author William Faulkner writes, "The past is never dead. It's not even past."[52]

For these reasons, there exists a literary tradition within the Southern Gothic linking vampires to conservatism. In his article "Confederates and Vampires: Manly Wade Wellman and the Gothic Sublime," W. Scott Poole shows how the supernatural become a conduit for expressing a devotion to the lost heritage of the American South. Looking at the works of Manly Wade Wellman—a Civil War historian and vampire fiction author, as well as a Confederate apologist—Poole finds that vampires challenge the rationality of modernity, conveying both a conservative concern over the defense of hierarchy and a return to an imagined past. He explains:

> Wellman asked his readers to ponder vampires for much the same reason he asked them to ponder Confederates. The virtues of the past, the dangers of modernity, could be seen whether the tale was of brave Civil War ancestors or the need to slay the murky thing in the shadows. In both tales, the gothic sublime awakened a profound suspicion of the promises of modernity.[53]

While neither Smith nor Amador acknowledges this conservative potential of the vampires in *True Blood*, it definitely contributes to their interpretive function in the series. Perhaps nowhere is this more evident than in the character of Bill. A white antebellum Southerner and Confederate soldier, turned vampire immediately after the Civil War, Bill provides direct access to the South's slave-owning past. And for the most part, the inhabitants of Bon Temps begin to welcome his presence specifically for this purpose. In the season-one episode "Sparks Fly Out," for example, Bill shares his war

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52 William Faulkner, *Requiem for a Nun* (New York: Random House, 1950), 73.

53 W. Scott Poole, "Confederates and Vampires: Manly Wade Wellman and the Gothic Sublime," *Sources in Popular Culture* 26, no. 3 (April 2004): 96.

experience with the Descendants of the Glorious Dead, a local historical group. While he does not romanticize the conflict, describing it as "a bunch of starving, freezing boys killing each other so the rich people can stay rich," the club is nevertheless captivated by his account. As Sookie's grandmother Adele (Lois Smith) says, she is just so fascinated with "that time." As a remnant of the past, Bill thus prevents the inhabitants of Bon Temps from resolving the region's issues of racial and social division. His very presence allows the continuance of a nostalgic view of the past—and subsequently a suspicious view of modernity.

Perhaps this explains why Bon Temps appears to only achieve an all-inclusive society with Bill's death. Over the course of the seventh and final season of *True Blood*, Bill realizes that he does not belong in the present. Furthermore, his continued existence impedes Sookie from living the life she deserves. In the series finale, entitled "Thank You," Bill clarifies:

> On my way over here tonight, I stopped by my family's graves: Caroline's, Sarah's, Thomas's, and mine. Mine is a lie. I should be with them. It's where I belong. Sookie, we're born, we grow, and we learn, and we have children. And maybe we get to meet our children's children, but then we pass on, and that is a life. And if we stay together, I would be denying you the best parts of that.

To finally put an end to the cycle, he asks her to kill him, to give him the "true death." Sookie cannot imagine acquiescing to Bill's request at first, but she eventually obliges. With the dramatic scene, Sookie—and, with her, the American South—attempts to finally put the past to rest, literally burying it in its grave. While she remarks that Bill will always remain a part of her—as the complex heritage of the South will also always endure—Sookie ultimately accepts that she needs to make a break with him in order to

move on. And by the end of the episode, it seems she does. In the series' final scene, Sookie, now happily married and pregnant, hosts a joyful Thanksgiving dinner attended by a true mixture of individuals, both human and supernatural.

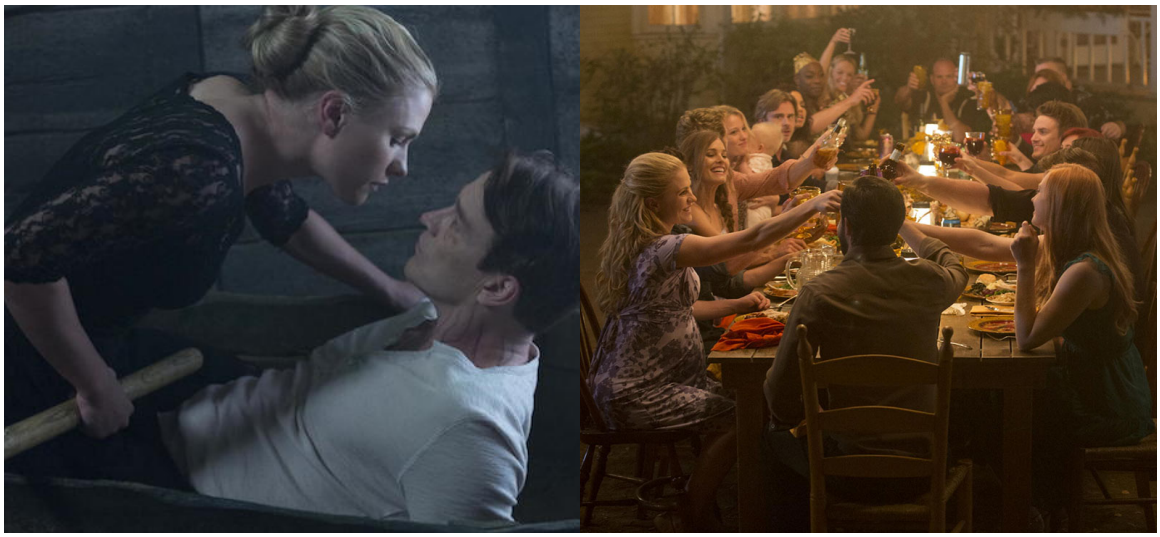

Figure 3: In the series finale, Sookie stakes Bill (left) and hosts an all-inclusive Thanksgiving dinner (right).

Many found this conclusion to the series dissatisfying. "What happened to the transgressive fun of *True Blood*?" asks *Entertainment Weekly*'s Melissa Maerz. "In the end, it's disappointing to find Bill transformed into just another old-fashioned Southern patriarch."[54] But what Maerz—and, to an extent, Smith and Amador—perhaps does not understand is that while Bill's vampirism allows him to blur and violate certain boundaries, he also always represents an old-fashioned Southern patriarch. He is quite literally the antebellum, white, Southern gentleman made eternal. The Louisiana version of the Byronic vampire. As such, Bill inherently embodies the white hegemony of the American South, reviving the region's historical anxieties about enduring racial conflict

[54] Melissa Maerz, "That terrible *True Blood* finale: What went wrong?" *Entertainment Weekly*, August 25, 2014, http://www.ew.com/article/2014/08/25/true-blood-finale-what-went-wrong.

and a dispossessed upper class. Only the vampire's removal from the community, therefore, helps to realize an integrated Southern society. But does Bill's death actually engender an era of modernity in Louisiana, or merely re-repress the past? While the series certainly offers some hope for the former, Bill is the only vampire to sacrifice himself. Eric, on the other hand, launches a lucrative business based on the labor of an enslaved human, arguably restoring rather than destroying white hegemony.

CONCLUSION

To better understand *True Blood*'s acceptance of modernity and racial integration, we must also situate the series as part of a regionalized media trend. For while the program is certainly the most researched vampire text set in the American South, it is hardly the only one in this category. Films including *Interview with the Vampire: The Vampire Chronicles* (Neil Jordan, 1994) and *Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter* (Timur Bekmambetov, 2012), and television series such as The CW's *The Vampire Diaries* (2009-Present) and *The Originals* (2013-Present) likewise use the figure of the vampire to unpack Southern Gothic concerns about race and class. *The Originals*, for example, similarly enacts particular racial and/or social subject positions through its array of supernatural creatures. Also like *True Blood*, the vampires on *The Originals* tend to signify traditional Southern power constructs.

So if every age embraces the vampire it needs, as Auerbach says, what purpose does the Southern vampire's negotiation of race and class serve in present Western society? Or as Kindinger asks, "What is the effect of such regional rootedness, what does it 'do' to the cultural figure 'vampire' and vice versa?" If we extrapolate Smith and

Amador's respective arguments about *True Blood*, we might assume that this trend illustrates the slow transition towards integration in contemporary Southern culture. As my analysis contends, however, these texts—and particularly their fanged characters—are far more complex and at times conservative than this romantic statement implies. Byronic vampires such as *True Blood*'s Bill Compton, *Interview with the Vampire*'s Louis de Pointe du Lac, or *The Originals'* Klaus Mikaelson often defend racial hierarchies in spite of the mutability afforded by their supernatural existence.

More importantly, can a text truly be both Southern Gothic and modern? Given the former's objective of resurrecting a repressed past in the present, I think not. The Southern Gothic communicates certain tensions and frustrations. It provides localized cultural negotiation. A text's achievement of the all-inclusive Southern community that Smith and Amador suggest presumably renders this function obsolete. Furthermore, this modern outcome seems incredibly unrealistic. The American South may not be capable of moving past its haunted history—and maybe it never should. The Southern Gothic arguably demonstrates that only through continually confronting the past can we prevent ourselves from repeating it.

We can conclude, therefore, that *True Blood* and other Southern vampire texts operate to provide a space to work through the unavoidable anxieties that a region defined by so many contradictions, scarred by so much violence, engenders. And while these vampires may not always facilitate progressive change, they nevertheless actively engage in a localized interrogation of race and class structures. Does this regionalized trend, however, also perpetuate the containment of race to the South, similar to what

Goddu argues? Undoubtedly so. As Kindinger contends, regional vampire fiction "addresses the Otherness of the American South by means of the Otherness of its inhabitants," thus reaffirming the "ostracized, 'othered' position the South is traditionally assigned."[55] Nevertheless, these texts perform important work, particularly within the discourses of race and class. As recent events both across the nation and particularly in the American South demonstrate, anxieties about racial hostilities and a dispossessed elite endure. And while scholarship remains reluctant to historicize the American Gothic, perhaps these Southern Gothic attempts will open the door to more localized analyses. For the time being, these considerations take us to the next chapter. In reviving a repressed past to negotiate race and class structures, Southern vampire texts also comment upon past racial injustices and current social inequities. In doing so, they also mediate our responses to this acknowledgement of culpability—namely, feelings of collective guilt and reparation efforts.

[55] Kindinger, "Reading Supernatural Fiction," 11.

Chapter Two: No Sympathy for the Undead: Learning How to Function with Collective Guilt

In Neil Jordan's 1994 film *Interview with the Vampire: The Vampire Chronicles*, Louis recounts his immortal life for a human biographer. More than any vampire before him, Louis expresses the moral ambivalence he feels after his transformation into one of the undead. "You must know something about the meaning of it all," Louis implores his maker Lestat. "Forgive me if I have a lingering respect for life," he later says. Louis feels immense remorse for the violence he commits and the pain he inflicts. And yet, he cannot stop. Louis is a predator; killing is unavoidable. As a result, he spends a significant portion of the film traveling across the globe in search of a reason for his damned existence, ultimately finding none. "I'm a spirit of preternatural flesh," Louis tells the interviewer. "Detached. Unchangeable. Empty."

While Louis is one of the first immortals to relate the story from his perspective, he is not the last. Many of the vampires that follow adopt this humanizing approach, initiating a shift within contemporary representations. Less monstrous and more sympathetic, less Other and more Self, the "new" vampire becomes an "introspective tragic hero."[56] And like Louis, these vampires are usually reluctant killers plagued by guilt. The fanged characters of *The Vampire Diaries* (The CW, 2009-Present), for example, feel emotion so intensely that they sometimes "turn off" their humanity as a way to escape the crushing guilt that results from their bloodlust.

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56 Conrad Aquilana, "The deformed transformed; or, from bloodsucker to Byronic hero—Polidori and the literary vampire," in *Open Graves, Open Minds: Representations of Vampires and the Undead from Enlightenment to the Present Day,* eds. Sam George and Bill Hughes (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), 35.

Expressions of remorse, however, are not entirely unique to contemporary vampires. To an extent, all vampires convey these feelings through their association with the Gothic, as the genre purposely evokes certain fears and guilts through its revival of a repressed history. As Leslie A. Fiedler explains, "the guilt which underlies the Gothic and motivates its plots is the guilt of the revolutionary haunted by the (paternal) past which he has been striving to destroy."[57] With the rise of the "new" vampire, however, the figure's negotiation of past sins takes on a new dimension. While more traditional vampires like Dracula project society's repressed guilts through their representation of the past, modern vampires like Louis also confront repressed guilts of their own.

In this chapter, I will apply a historical and sociological framework of personal and collective guilt to better understand how vampire texts set in the American South engage with feelings of remorse. To do so, I will examine two Southern vampire texts: the film *Interview with the Vampire: The Vampire Chronicles* (Neil Jordan, 1994) and the television series *The Originals* (The CW, 2013-Present). As the first and most recent examples of contemporary Southern vampires in film and television, respectively, comparing these two texts not only demonstrates the breadth of this regionalized media trend but also reveals certain similarities and differences. Through my analysis, I conclude that both *Interview with the Vampire* and *The Originals* use the Southern vampire's feelings of remorse to address varied constructions of regional, collective guilt. Neither text, however, develops the functional aspects of the emotion. In other words, the Southern vampire's experience of guilt does not motivate him to perform acts of

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[57] Leslie A. Fiedler, "Charles Brockden Brown and the Invention of the American Gothic, in "*Love and Death in the American Novel,* Revised Edition (New York: Stein and Day, 1966),129.

reparation towards victims or other aggrieved parties. As a result, while these texts perform important cultural work in acknowledging past wrongs, they fail to demonstrate the need to take certain action in order to atone for those wrongs.

RECONCILING IDENTITY AND GUILT WITH THE "NEW" SOUTHERN VAMPIRE

Examinations of "new" vampires like Louis dominate recent scholarship, with multiple anthologies studying how the figure projects the human condition and shifting cultural attitudes.[58] Scholars, however, rarely address the increasing significance of guilt to contemporary vampires. And those that do tend to bury it within a larger analysis of the figure's emotional experience. Jonathan Bassett, for example, explores the vampire's ambivalence to immortality in his article "It's Hard Out Here for an Immortal: Angst and Ennui in *Interview with the Vampire* and the Television Series *Highlander*." Kathleen Rout's piece "Who Do You Love? Anne Rice's Vampires and the Moral Transition," conversely, investigates Rice's moral neutrality and shifting focus on empathy.

Given the importance of guilt to the vampire as both a Gothic figure and a mediator of human identity, however, it is essential for research to tackle these feelings of remorse more directly. The regionalized media trend of Southern vampire texts presents itself as an ideal space within which to start this analysis. Not only do its vampires often embody the figure of the reluctant killer but also its texts' Southern settings give the figure's complex negotiation of guilt additional layers of significance. As Fiedler notes,

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[58] For example, see Joan Gordon and Veronica Hollinger, eds., *Blood Read: The Vampire as Metaphor in Contemporary Culture*; Sam Georges and Bill Hughes, eds., *Open Graves, Open Minds: Representations of Vampires and the Undead from Enlightenment to the Present Day*; and Deborah Mutch, ed., *The Modern Vampire and Human Identity*.

the tale of terror appeals to Americans because, "in the United States, certain special guilts awaited projection in the Gothic form." He explains:

> A dream of innocence had sent Europeans across the ocean to build a new society immune to the compounded evil of the past from which no one in Europe could ever feel himself free. But the slaughter of the Indians…and the abominations of the slave trade…provided new evidence that evil did not remain with the world that had been left behind.[59]

And arguably nowhere in the nation are these "special guilts" felt more deeply than in the American South. The Southern Gothic concerns about continuing racial hostilities and a dispossessed white aristocracy expose the nature of the region's repressed guilts—historical guilt, generational guilt, national guilt, white guilt. As a result, while most modern vampires grapple with feelings of individual guilt, Southern vampires also work through notions of regional, collective guilt.

According to historian Elazar Barkan, countries only recently began demanding other nations acknowledge historical injustices and seek methods of reconciliation. He argues that, following the Cold War, the West adopted a new moral frame that made a need for restitution to past victims a major factor in both national politics and international diplomacy. "The new international emphasis on morality has been characterized not only by accusing other countries of human rights abuses but also by self-examination," he explains in his book *The Guilt of Nations: Restitution and Negotiating Historical Injustices* (2000). "This national self-reflexivity is the new guilt of nations."[60] While Barkan remains skeptical about how and why nations respond to

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[59] Fiedler, "Charles Brockden Brown," 143.

[60] Elazar Barkan, *The Guilt of Nations: Restitution and Negotiating Historical Injustices* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2000), xvii.

guilt—questioning whether they act out of genuine goodwill, a desire to restore one's self-image, or just expectations of political correctness—he nevertheless believes that this new international order offers a mechanism of negotiation between perpetrator and victim that enables the rewriting of historical and national identity.

Sociologists Nyla R. Branscombe and Bertjan Doosje apply a social identity theoretical framework to Barkan's research in their edited anthology, *Collective Guilt: International Perspectives* (2004). Looking at cases from around the globe, the contributors examine strategies for avoiding collective guilt and the conditions under which groups do experience it. For example, Lars Rensmann's "Collective Guilt, National Identity, and Political Processes in Contemporary Germany" examines how national identification among adults who lived during the Holocaust engenders defensive responses that either reduce or inhibit feelings of collective guilt. Ultimately, however, the collection of scholars considers guilt's potential as a functional emotion. In other words, how the emotional experience provokes a desire to correct past and current transgressions. This motivating factor about guilt becomes increasingly important at a collective level, as it may also help to avoid further intergroup conflict. "For this reason alone," Branscombe and Doosje argue, "collective guilt is an important social psychological issue—it is not simply about the past, but it has serious implications for present and future intergroup relations."[61]

Opinions remain highly divided, however, as to the value of reassessing a group's past actions, particularly within the United States. As Aarti Iyer, Colin Wayne Leach, and

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[61] Nyla R. Branscombe and Bertjan Doosje, "International Perspectives on the Experience of Collective Guilt," in *Collective Guilt: International Perspectives* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 7.

Anne Pedersen conclude in their chapter, "Racial Wrongs and Restitutions: The Role of Guilt and Other Group-Based Emotions," while American racial guilt about both the legacy of slavery as well as institutional discrimination should encourage efforts of restitution towards aggrieved parties, it presents serious limitations as a response to group wrongs for multiple reasons. First, given the unpleasant nature of guilt, it is avoided whenever possible. The resulting rarity of collective guilt thus restricts its ability to motivate actions against group inequality. And second, its focus on making restitution limits its role as a moral basis for other forms of opposition to inequality, such as opportunity policies that do not explicitly focus on apology or compensation. Instead, the authors promote both sympathy and moral outrage as potentially more effective emotional responses to racial injustice.

How might we apply these historical and sociological understandings of collective guilt, however, to the Gothic? Fortunately, vampires are not the only supernatural figure to haunt the American cultural imagination and negotiate its repressed guilts. As Renée L. Bergland demonstrates in her book, *The National Uncanny: Indian Ghosts and American Subjects* (2000), American literature has invoked Native American specters for centuries. But why must Americans write themselves as haunted? Similar to Barkan and Branscombe and Doosje, Bergland finds that the spectralization of Native Americans helps to construct national identity. "First and foremost," she argues, "the ghosting of Indians is a technique of removal."[62] In dispossessing Native Americans of their bodies, American writers also discursively remove them from the physical territory and deposit

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62 Renée L. Bergland, *The National Uncanny: Indian Ghosts and American Subjects* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 2000), 4.

them within white imaginative spaces. "On the other hand," Bergland continues, "the ghosting of Indians presents us with a host of doubts about America and American ideology."[63] Like vampires, ghosts haunt the present by reviving repressed fears and guilts. Spectral Native American figures, Bergland contends, thus function as both agents of Americanization as well as symbols of national guilt, serving as constant reminders of past horrors as well as the fragility of American national identity. While this dual purpose appears paradoxical, Bergland finds that American literature nevertheless obsessively conjures spectral Native Americans because they sustain American nationalism. "Although they threaten the American national project," she explains, "they also nationalize the imagination. Guilt over the dispossession of Indians and fear of their departed spirits sometimes function as perverse sources of pleasure and pride for white Americans because they signify a successful appropriation of the American spirit."[64]

Notwithstanding their similar Gothic functions, however, vampires are not ghosts. Unlike their spectral relatives, vampires are fully corporeal. Their uncanniness does not derive from the mysterious nature through which they appear and disappear but rather the everlasting unchangeablity of their physical appearance. And partly because they are flesh and blood, vampires more than frighten the mind. They are potentially ruthless killers, capable of unspeakable violence. Vampires thus serve not only as reminders of past horrors, but also perpetrators of current ones. Their Gothic enactment of the

63 Bergland, *The National Uncanny,* 5.
64 Bergland, *The National Uncanny,* 19.

"continuing pressures of the past upon the present"[65] is both psychological—menacing the American imagination and national identity—and physical, threatening the life of both the personal and group self.

In some respects, the greater physical agency that vampires possess makes them more effective at maintaining American national identity. As corporeal rather than spectral figures of the past, vampires can commit historical wrongs in the present, furthering rather than ending intergroup conflict. And as the previous chapter explores, sometimes even their very existence forestalls social integration. It is this potential, however, that makes the modern vampire's feeling of guilt such an important area of study, and their role as mediators of collective guilt so complex. As the "new" vampire experiences guilt, he takes responsibility for not only past sins but also ongoing ones. His feelings of remorse also open up the possibility for a mending of intergroup relations. In other words, through the figure of the vampire, the past can literally apologize for its mistakes and try to make amends.

Can, however, is the operative word. As we shall see with the following analysis of *Interview with the Vampire* and *The Originals*, sometimes vampires' feelings of guilt become so self-focused and chronic that they fail to seek methods of reparation for their victims. As a result, they also make a striking commentary about the effectiveness of collective guilt, particularly white guilt, in the American South.

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65 David Punter and Glennis Byron, "William Faulkner (1897-1962)," in *The Gothic* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 116.

INTERVIEW WITH THE VAMPIRE: CONFRONTING (AND EVADING) WHITE GUILT

Based on Anne Rice's literary bestseller, *Interview with the Vampire: The Vampire Chronicles* covers the undead life of Louis de Pointe du Lac (Brad Pitt). Before becoming a vampire in 1791, Louis operates a successful slave-owning plantation in Louisiana. Upon losing his wife and child, however, Louis becomes near suicidal with grief. The vampire Lestat de Lioncourt (Tom Cruise) answers Louis' death wish, offering him the alternative of immortality. Louis accepts, but finds his undead existence and its murderous demands almost too horrible to bear. To dissuade Louis from leaving, Lestat gives him a family, turning a young girl orphaned by plague, Claudia (Kirsten Dunst). And with their adopted vampire daughter, the trio finds happiness—for a time. When Claudia realizes that she will remain a child forever, she blames Lestat and tries to kill him. Freed from their maker, Louis and Claudia travel abroad in an attempt to find others like them and the reasons for their existence. The pair do not find the answers they seek, however; and when they reach Paris, their crimes against Lestat come back to bite them. Alone once again, Louis returns to Louisiana in the 1980s, finally accepting the cruel banality of his vampire fate.

Given Louis' position of authority during his life as both human and vampire—first as slave master and then as predator—Victoria Amador argues that the character embodies white hegemony. Similar to *True Blood*'s Bill Compton, Louis is the antebellum Southern aristocrat made eternal. His existence in the present thus serves as a constant reminder of the nation's slave-owning past and the horrors committed by one group against another. Furthermore, despite his surviving into contemporary times,

Louis' attitudes about racial difference remain as unchanged as his physical appearance, preserving historical notions of social division and white superiority. As a result, Amador posits in "The Gothic Louisiana of Charlaine Harris and Anne Rice," Louis and Lestat feed on humans—including many non-white humans, such as Louis' slaves—without fear of reprisal. "Slavery is an extreme example of the Gothic struggles between the empowered and the powerless and Rice's vampires are a rather obvious metaphor for the literal draining of human beings by the plantation owners," she contends.[66] Vampires such as Louis and Lestat justify their feeding upon African slaves, she argues, by maintaining the European colonial fantasy that such individuals are both different and inferior. As a result, these characters also sustain traditional power structures.

If we accept Louis' role as a symbol of white hegemony, we can then interpret his intense feelings of remorse as representative of white guilt. As Amador herself argues, "Louis' discomfort with his position and his inability to find emotional or spiritual peace as either human or vampire can be read as an indirect commentary upon a racist society whose identity was permanently transformed by the Civil War."[67] Notwithstanding the persistence of his racial prejudices, Louis begins to recognize the humanity of his slaves after he becomes a vampire. It takes the physical act of killing for him to realize the injustices of white hegemony and his particular culpability as part of that system. Just as Louis reminds the nation of slavery, vampirism forces Louis to confront the horrors of his privilege for eternity—an acknowledgement that provokes feelings of self-loathing and

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66 Victoria Amador, "The Gothic Louisiana of Charlaine Harris and Anne Rice," in *The Modern Vampire and Human Identity,* ed. Deborah Mutch (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 173.
67 Amador, "Gothic Louisiana," 172.

remorse. Director Neil Jordan considers Louis' emotional turmoil one of the driving forces of the film, asking, "What would it be like to live in a world in which there are no moral consequences for any of our actions? Would we feel a sense of freedom from that, would we feel a sense of relief? Or would we actually long to be held accountable for what we do?"[68]

While Louis experiences guilt, his concern remains almost entirely about himself. Louis laments how vampirism forces him to kill, but feels little compassion towards those he murders. In other words, Louis' contrition causes such extreme dysphoria that he thinks far more about his own distress and the challenge to his sense of self than about why his immoral actions harm others and how he can correct such transgressions. Iyer, Leach, and Pedersen identify this as one of the main impediments of personal and collective guilt as a functional emotion. "Personal guilt," they argue, "is a self-conscious reflection on one's immoral behavior as an individual." Collective guilt, we can extrapolate, considers the group self instead of the individual self. The scholars continue,

> This self-focus leads people who feel guilt to attend less to those they have wronged, and more to how they themselves feel about their transgression. Those who feel personal guilt think about themselves much more than they think about others. Thus, the relatively self-focused nature of guilt makes it seem more a selfish concern for one's own pain than a sympathetic concern for others.[69]

Louis' search for answers from other vampires further illustrates the self-focused nature of his guilt. He does not truly hope to learn of a viable solution that will stop him from

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68 Neil Jordan, "Commentary by Director Neil Jordan," *Interview with the Vampire: The Vampire Chronicles*, 20th anniversary edition, directed by Neil Jordan (1994; Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2014), Blu-ray.

69 Aarti Iyer, Colin Wayne Leach, and Anne Pedersen, "Racial Wrongs and Restitutions: The Role of Guilt and Other Group-based Emotions," in *Collective Guilt: International Perspectives,* eds. Nyla R. Branscombe and Bertjan Doosje (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 263.

committing violence. (Louis lives off of the blood of animals for a time, but eventually returns to feeding on humans.) Instead, he largely wants an explanation that will help to justify his behavior.

Louis finds no such reprieve, however; and, as a result, his feelings of guilt become chronic. "What if all I have is my suffering? My regret?" he asks. And as Robyn K. Mallett and Janet K. Swim argue in their piece, "Collective Guilt in the United States: Predicting Support for Social Policies that Alleviate Social Injustice," this severity of feeling further limits the emotion's capability of encouraging restitution efforts. They explain, "Despite the apparent benefits of feeling guilty, it appears that guilt works best when it is felt in moderation. Chronic feelings of personal guilt at the individual level"—and thus collective guilt at the group level—"are actually associated with less prosocial behavior." In Louis' case, his guilt becomes so unbearable that he believes he will never be able to right his wrongs; consequently, he ceases to try. By the conclusion of the film, Louis assumes his role as killer—and thus his place within white hegemony—rather than continue to challenge it. In the context of the American South, Louis thus becomes the aggrieved white man, so overwhelmed by feelings of self-reproach regarding the legacy of slavery and ongoing racial inequality that he stops accepting responsibility. His feelings of guilt are not enough to motivate acts of reparation.

This inhibiting result partly explains why Iyer, Leach, and Pedersen advocate for sympathy or moral outrage as more effective responses to racial injustice. For, unlike collective guilt, sympathy focuses on the Other, drawing attention to the discrimination faced by the disadvantaged group; while moral outrage focuses on the system, placing

blame on a third party. Therefore, because neither of these emotions requires self-recrimination, people who experience them can advocate for change without necessarily calling the goodness or morality of their personal or collective identity into question. Louis, however, never turns the focus of his guilt outside of himself. Consequently, he offers no solution to feelings of collective guilt other than its denial.

But does the American South really have no chance for reconciliation with its past, and the past's influence on continued intergroup conflict? Subsequent Southern vampire texts suggest that resolution is possible. Nearly 20 years after the release of *Interview with the Vampire*, *The Originals* demonstrates a similarly problematic self-focused interpretation of collective guilt. Unlike Louis, however, the series' vampires do not reach the same conclusion of futility, and instead uphold the enduring possibility of and hope for redemption and atonement.

THE ORIGINALS: STRIVING TOWARDS A HOPEFUL FUTURE

A spin-off from *The Vampire Diaries*, *The Originals* is an ongoing American television series broadcast on The CW. The "originals" referenced by the program's title are the Mikaelson family, the first and oldest generation of vampires. At the start of the series, three of the Miklaeson siblings—Elijah (Daniel Gilles), Rebekah (Claire Holt), and their half-brother Klaus (Joseph Morgan)—return to present-day New Orleans and its French Quarter. After having helped build the city centuries before, the Mikaelson siblings view the Crescent City as a lost home, a kingdom they hope to reclaim. Upon their arrival, however, they realize that taking back New Orleans will be harder than they expected. Klaus' former protégé, Marcel (Charles Michael Davis), and his coven of

vampires control the city now, ruling its supernatural inhabitants with an iron fist. And the appearance of the Miklaesons sparks a war among the city's rival factions, with witches, werewolves, and humans also becoming involved in the struggle for power. For the Mikaelson siblings, however, the conflict puts more than their dominion over New Orleans at stake. It also endangers the life of Klaus' unborn child. Hoping to reconcile their family after centuries of betrayal and resentment, the Mikaelsons are determined to protect the baby from their growing list of enemies.

If Louis is part of the white hegemony, the Originals are its founders. All thousand-year-old Vikings, they are the highest authority among vampires and the source from which all others derive.[70] They are also very much Southerners, immigrating to present day Virginia in the late 10th century and later making New Orleans their permanent home. Therefore, we can similarly interpret the torment they feel as representative of collective guilt. The Mikaelsons may be the most powerful vampires, but they are very much haunted by their pasts. The series develops the characters' emotional turmoil through a consistent use of flashbacks, narratively revealing the past guilts the Originals try and fail to internally repress.

Much like Louis, however, the guilt experienced by the Mikaelson siblings is almost entirely self-focused—if for a different reason. While Louis blames his vampirism for his misdeeds, the Originals blame the abuses of their parents. Their mother, Esther (Alice Evans), a witch, is responsible for turning them into vampires in the first place,

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[70] Adding to their hegemonic credentials, the Mikaelsons are also demonstratively British, particularly in their way of speaking. As a result, they come to represent white supremacy not only through their Aryan origins but also through their symbolic implication of colonialism.

thereby cursing them with bloodlust. And their father, Mikael (Sebastian Roché), also a vampire, has spent most of the past one thousand years hunting them. Rebekah describes the effects of this trauma in the first-season episode, "Farewell to Storyville." "Centuries later, each of us is broken," she tells Klaus. "We are the strongest creatures in the world, and yet we are damaged beyond repair. We live without hope, but we will never die. We are the definition of cursed. Always and forever." Notwithstanding the harms they commit against others, therefore, the Originals remain focused on their own emotional distress. And consequently, they are, like Louis, reluctant to fully accept responsibility for past wrongs or seek methods of reconciliation. They regard themselves more as victims—not perpetrators—of intergroup conflict.

This begins to change in the second season, however, when Elijah recalls a personal transgression he repressed for centuries. Long considering himself the noblest member of his family, this revelation deeply troubles him. But for the first time, Elijah completely acknowledges his own culpability. In other words, he seeks out methods of restitution. As Iyer, Leach, and Pedersen explain, restitution results from feelings of guilt because it helps restore moral value. Because guilt is so often self-focused, however, these efforts often serve to assuage the perpetrator as much as they make amends to the victim. "Those feeling guilty…appear to be particularly concerned with their sense of themselves as moral and good people," they argue. "Acts of restitution may be more focused on restoring a sense of self that has been challenged by self-blame."[71] While this caveat certainly plays a role in Elijah's response, his guilt becomes less self-focused as he

[71] Iyer, Leach, and Pedersen, "Racial Wrongs and Restitutions," 275.

simultaneously experiences feelings of empathy. After acknowledging his past sins, Elijah begins to better understand the gravity of his and his siblings' more recent offenses. He shows concern for others. And as a result, Elijah plans to redress his past actions. He actively seeks to form alliances with previously aggrieved groups, such as the witches and the werewolves, thereby developing a more inclusive social identity for himself and his family.

While Elijah remains the only Original to most definitively take action towards reconciliation, his siblings' experiences with guilt also diverge from Louis' through their continued belief in redemption—if not for themselves, than through the next generation as represented by Klaus' daughter, appropriately named Hope. "What's done is never done. It remains within us, the story we tell ourselves so we know who we are," Klaus says in "Farewell to Storyville." "Perhaps it's time for a new story." Louis responds to his chronic feelings of guilt by finding a way to avoid them; the Originals, on the other hand, regard their emotional distress as a reason to fight for a better future. In the context of the American South, this naturally offers a more optimistic outcome about the effects of collective guilt as a response to racial and social inequity. While the Mikaelsons, as white hegemony, still do not completely take responsibility for their prominent role in past and present intergroup conflict, their decision not to avoid feelings of collective guilt but rather find ways to make reparations for them shows a potential for social progressivism and reconciliation. As Branscombe and Doosje conclude,

> While questioning the morality of both past and present forms of intergroup harm could, on the surface, appear to be inconsistent with ingroup interests, the experience of collective guilt may be an important impetus for the construction of

> a revitalized social identity. Indeed, perceiving a different future identity as possible may be an important incentive for confronting the past.[72]

Unlike Louis, the Originals see the potential for a better future. And as a result, they do whatever they need to do—including redressing past wrongs—in order to help make that future a reality.

This series further develops the possibility of a revitalized New Orleans in which subgroups make amends for their past wrongs and treat one another equally through its non-Original characters. The Crescent City is filled with vampires, witches, and werewolves, all committing harms against one another in the past. This history of conflict and oppression creates immense emotional distress in the present, both in terms of collective guilt and resentment. "You're new," Marcel tells one of his freshly turned vampires in the season-two episode "Gonna Set Your Flag on Fire," "but [the werewolves] have a long list of reasons to hate us." At first, the continued feelings of blame and animosity prevent these groups from reconciling with one another. By the second season, however, they appear willing to break the cycle, forgiving transgressions and establishing alliances.

Given the series currently consists of only two seasons, the question remains as to whether or not it will actually realize this inclusive social identity, especially when its main protagonist—Klaus—seems the biggest obstacle towards its achievement. Klaus largely continues to avoid taking responsibility for his actions, and often sees the formation of relationships between groups as purely the means for his reassuming

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[72] Nyla R. Branscombe and Bertjan Doosje, "Preface," in *Collective Guilt: International Perspectives* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), x.

control. But perhaps even he is beginning to accept the need for reconciliation and social equality. In the season-two episode "They All Asked for You," he remarks, "In every moment, a choice exists. We can cling to the past or embrace the inevitability of change and allow a brighter future to unfold before us. Such an uncertain future may call for even more uncertain allies. Either way, a new day is coming, whether we like it or not."

CONCLUSION

As a regional trend, Southern vampire texts thus provide a space through which to critically reflect upon the past and present injustices of the American South. As both Other and Self, "new" vampires such as Louis and the Mikaelsons negotiate feelings of collective guilt in two distinct ways: through the evocation of the past in the present as well as through their own struggles with remorse and attempts at restitution. "*Interview with the Vampire* is about grief, guilt, and the search for salvation even though one is in the eyes of the world and one's own a total outcast!" Rice explains about her work. She continues, "When vampires search for their past trying to figure out who they are, where they come from, if they have a purpose, that's me asking the same question about human beings."[73] This partly explains the very creation of this regionalized media trend, not to mention its recent popularity. Western society, and particularly the American South, desires an outlet for its own feelings of dysphoria, and vampires offer themselves as effective mediators. Southern vampires, however, can only represent—not enact—reconciliation.

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[73] Anne Rice, quoted in Jules Zanger, "Metaphor into Metonymy: The Vampire Next Door," in *Blood Read: The Vampire as Metaphor in Contemporary Culture*, eds. Joan Gordon and Veronica Hollinger (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997), 23.

While Americans—from a variety of racial and ethnic backgrounds—begin to address their own feelings of collective guilt through these texts, they arguably still avoid taking responsibility by containing these emotions and actions to the mythical and the monstrous. Vampires are not responsible for the past horrors of the American South, however; humans are. In some ways, therefore, Southern vampires potentially serve as another method of avoiding culpability and thus further social inequity. Nevertheless, possibly the examination of collective guilt within Southern vampire texts will provoke the acknowledgement of similar feelings, and a resulting desire for reparation, within Southerners themselves. As Branscombe and Doojse argue, "Seeking forgiveness for past wrongs may be a prelude to developing an inclusive social identity where all subgroups are treated according to the same standard of justice."[74] Partly in response to this prospect, the following chapter conducts a more in-depth investigation of the audience and their viewing experience.

[74] Branscombe and Doosje, "Preface," x.

Chapter Three: Beyond Textual Analysis: Audience Studies and the Diversity of Viewer Engagement

"Seriously, some media studies grad student somewhere has to be writing a thesis about gender and politics in vampire media—and she or he must be just drooling over *The Originals* right now," quips Charlie Jane Anders in an online recap of The CW program. His article, "A Clip That Shows Why *The Originals* Is Amazing PhD Dissertation Fodder," posits that the series feels like two different shows that fit together "surprisingly well." The first is a family melodrama, as the Mikaelson vampires "declaim at each other in cod-Shakespearean speeches, and debate the significance of centuries-old grudges and ideological spats." While Anders considers this aspect of the series highly entertaining, he also finds it completely disconnected from reality. In this particular episode, entitled "Brotherhood of the Damned," four of the Mikaelson siblings become trapped in a magical realm, where they debate the accuracy of their animal totems. "I'm not even making that up," Anders comments. The series' other show, however, is an "intense political mish-mash," using vampires to slyly engage with issues such as the legacy of slavery and the ways in which marginalized people get pushed out of cities. Juxtaposed against the brotherly spat, for example, "Brotherhood" also features flashbacks to Marcel's participation in World War I, fighting with an all-black unit essentially used by the army as cannon fodder.[75]

As quite possibly the only published piece to address the cultural implications of *The Originals* (The CW, 2013-Present), Anders' article certainly speaks towards the

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[75] Charlie Jane Anders, "A Clip That Shows Why *The Originals* Is Amazing PhD Dissertation Fodder," *io9,* January 27, 2015, http://io9.com/a-clip-that-shows-why-the-originals-is-amazing-phd-diss-1682163123.

necessity and value of my own project. *The Originals* represents a recent and potent example of how Southern vampire texts unpack Southern Gothic tropes and concerns. As my first chapter begins to explore, the show engages with its setting in a variety of meaningful ways, incorporating the unique appearance and history of New Orleans into its narrative and overall tone. But Anders' argument also raises important questions about audience reception. For, despite its acknowledgement of academia, Anders' piece primarily serves to express his own viewing experience.

This line of questioning takes us to the next stage of my investigation. Chapters one and two use textual analysis to examine Southern vampire texts as a media trend, asking how they collectively negotiate particular anxieties or concepts. This chapter, on the other hand, adopts a different methodology—reception studies—to explore the audience's experience with Southern vampire texts, asking how actual viewers engage with and make sense of them via the Internet. In what way does the viewer respond to particular characters, narratives, and themes? How does the Southern setting factor into these interpretations? And in what way does the audience use these texts in their everyday lives? Focusing on the audience of *The Originals*, this chapter conducts a preliminary investigation of media locations for and interactions with the series online. In doing so, I not only survey the diversity of audience engagements with the television program, but also identify recurring trends that emerge within that diversity.

As this investigation reveals, a divide often exists between academic and audience interpretations. Unlike Anders, most viewers who chronicle their watching experience do not explicitly identify the allegorical efforts of *The Originals*. In other words, the

audience does not always see the "other" show, the "political mish-mash," embedded within the family saga. This does not, however, invalidate the observations of either the scholar or the viewer. On the contrary, it demonstrates the importance of ethnographic analysis to the study of media texts and trends. Academics and fans hold different needs and desires, and series such as *The Originals* satisfy both. Therefore, to try to make sense of Southern vampires in contemporary film and television—to find reasons for the trend's creation and prevalence—we cannot only study the texts. We must also look at their viewers.

TELEVISION ETHNOGRAPHY: APPROACHING THE INTERNET AS A RESEARCH TOOL

As chapters one and two make evident, scholarship about Southern vampires in contemporary film and television remains limited in both number and scope. And methodology represents one of the most prominent gaps in such research. Brigid Cherry and Victoria Amador, for example, provide useful insights into the metaphorical function of Southern vampires. Cherry considers how *True Blood* adopts a "gothic Sensibility of the South"[76] to negotiate identity and difference. Amador, on the other hand, examines texts such as *True Blood* and *Interview with the Vampire* to explore how Southern vampires engage with the region's past and comment upon its present. Neither scholar, however, extends her research beyond textual analysis. Consequently, they offer no explanation as to the creation of this regionalized media trend or its current popularity among viewers. However, if we are to fully understand the purpose and impact of the

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76 Brigid Cherry, "Before the Night Is Through: *True Blood* as Cult TV," in *True Blood: Investigating Vampires and Southern Gothic* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2012), 9.

Southern vampire, we must address these factors. Therefore, we must also use reception studies as a theoretical framework. In examining the audience's experience, reception analysis provides a useful methodological counterpoint to textual studies, enriching academic readings with ethnographic data.

The field of reception studies offers a variety of potential research methods, with varying degrees of audience proximity, with which to address Southern vampire texts. For my investigation of viewers of *The Originals*, however, I follow the multi-sited ethnographic approach outlined by Christine Hine in her article, "Towards ethnography of television on the Internet: A mobile strategy for exploring mundane interpretive activities." Hine rightly identifies the Internet as an exceedingly useful research tool, especially when it comes to the sociological study of media audiences. It not only provides new forms of collective fan engagement but also makes the practices of that engagement "persistent, traceable, and amenable to sociological gaze."[77] It other words, it makes the context of online fandom more widely visible to researchers than ever before.

Notwithstanding these benefits, Hine argues that studies focus too heavily on committed fans with an active Internet presence. This causes the research to overlook more casual and distracted forms of engagement, and thereby distorts any conclusions drawn about the way audiences experience and connect with both media products and the Internet in general. Furthermore, analyses also overly center on a particular bounded site of intense fandom, such as television. Treating television as an isolated medium, however, ignores its role within the complex and converging media environment. With

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[77] Christine Hine, "Towards ethnography of television on the Internet: A mobile strategy for exploring mundane interpretive activities," *Media, Culture & Society* 33, no. 4 (2011): 568.

these methodological challenges in mind, Hine develops an unobtrusive, mobile approach to ethnography of television reception on the Internet—or what she calls "an online version of 'hanging out'"[78]—that seeks to better explore the audience's fluid consumption and the ways in which viewers integrate the media into their daily lives.

To demonstrate this approach, Hine conducts a case study of the long-running BBC program *Antiques Roadshow* (1979-Present), exploring the series' diverse manifestations on the Internet and the varying ways viewers come to enjoy and interpret it. First, Hine conducts a Google search of the term "*Antiques Roadshow*" in an attempt to visit as many of the sites as she can in which references to the series appear online. This strategy leads her to the official site of the show's producers; dedicated discussion forums, including those both official and fan-made, as well as others that mentioned the series in passing; and local media reports and filming schedules. Next, she explores within each site, reading discussion comments and viewing associated pages. Over the course of her observations, she also begins to synthesize the ways in which viewers evoke *Antiques Roadshow* within various online settings. Through her "taxonomy of references,"[79] as she calls it, Hine finds that the official website situates the series as an ongoing phenomenon and highlights its participatory nature and generic ties to factual programming. Its fan culture shows interest in the antique objects themselves as well as the series' presenters and experts. More casual viewers invoke feelings of nostalgia. Others appropriate this sense of familiarity to parody the series for humorous intent. Hine concludes that her ethnographic survey supplements textual analyses of *Antiques*

78 Hine, "Towards ethnography," 570.
79 Hine, "Towards ethnography," 578.

Roadshow, extending the understanding of its content as well as challenging assumptions made about the audience's viewing experience and competence.

In applying Hine's mobile method to my own project, my research follows the same steps as her case study. I use a Google search of the term "*The Originals*" to begin a survey of the spaces where audience reception to the series appears online. My exploration of these sites then helps me build a taxonomy of references, or perceived trends within particular sites and degrees of viewer engagement. And as Hine anticipates with her own study, my investigation of the audience's relationship with *The Originals* also reveals other forms of meaning-making, particularly those conducted offline, as well as areas in which I or others can apply more direct methods of study—such as posting prompts for audience feedback or conducting personal interviews—in the future.

Despite its research benefits, however, Hine's approach presents certain methodological challenges. As with any method that focuses solely on found digital data, or materials posted online, Hine's mobile strategy runs the risk of collecting only the information that is most easily discovered by dominant search engines and from the viewers that leave the greatest digital presence. Naturally, not every member of the audience publicly chronicles his or her viewing experiencing online. As such, it is of great importance to remain aware of who possesses the access, time, and knowledge to participate in Internet forums, and to not let those that do overly prejudice assumptions made about the audience as a whole. This research only represents a select portion of viewers. Nevertheless, a completely accurate understanding of the entire audience is impossible. In examining a sample, therefore, I always keep in mind the limitations of my

methodology and the shortcomings of the selection it gathers when drawing my conclusions.

Ethnographic studies using the Internet likewise raise questions about how to most ethically conduct research. Amanda D. Lotz and Sharon Marie Ross outline these concerns in their article, "Toward Ethical Cyberspace Audience Research: Strategies for Using the Internet for Television Audience Studies." As the two scholars explain, Internet research is fundamentally different from that performed in the "real world," from the issue of perceived privacy to the practices of gaining consent and lurking to the challenge of balancing anonymity with data accessibility. Ultimately, Lotz and Ross emphasize the need for reflexivity throughout the research process: respecting a site's communication norms, gaining informed consent with participants as necessary, and conceptualizing the project as a one of exchange. Similar to Hine, they also stress the importance of developing a multi-sited approach and using the Internet as a tool rather than just a space for research. Notwithstanding the methodological limitations Lotz and Ross identify, however, they still acknowledge its value. They posit:

> Internet-based audience research can be exceptionally helpful in gaining distinct snapshots of viewer response and understanding of texts. The less labor intensive venue of Web forums may help researchers add audience study to a textual or institutional analysis, consequently expanding understandings of a show or phenomenon and increasing voices heard.[80]

In using Hine's method, my project seeks to uphold Lotz and Ross's tenets for ethical audience research. While my observations derive from lurking—I do not interact with

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80 Amanda D. Lotz and Sharon Marie Ross, "Toward Ethical Cyberspace Audience Research: Strategies for Using the Internet for Television Audience Studies," *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 48, no. 3 (September 2004): 502.

research subjects—I try to remain reflexive about the expectations of particular field sites, and especially those who contribute to them, in order to best protect the participants whom I choose to study.

THE ORIGINALS: WHERE AND HOW THE SERIES EXISTS ONLINE

As with Hine's study of *Antiques Roadshow*, a Google search of the term "*The Originals*" produces an immense wealth of data, generating over 73 million hits. I begin my journey down the rabbit hole by visiting the top site, which is also the series' official page. Rather than posting text information like an episode guide, the site offers a variety of videos, from full episodes to clips and extras. The page also recommends videos related to other hit series on The CW, including *The Vampire Diaries, iZombie, Jane the Virgin, Supernatural, Reign,* and *Arrow*. Links to explore the official pages of these and other network programs are also featured at the bottom of the page. The site thus principally serves to situate *The Originals* within the context of The CW and its brand.

The CW is largely known for its current and provocative programming geared towards young, mostly female viewers. Within the past two years, however, the network has further realigned itself with its niche audience by establishing a transmedia broadcast brand with the tagline "TV Now." As Troika—the brand consultancy and creative agency that designed The CW's new identity—outlines in their case study, 18 percent of The CW's viewership comes from digital platforms. And 93 percent of the network's online viewers never watch its programming on television.[81] Recognizing these statistics, The

81 "Troika Rebrands The CW, Launches 'TV Now' Tagline," Troika, http://www.troika.tv/troika-rebrands-the-cw/.

CW's new brand seeks multi-platform continuity, including a unifying icon system and recurring visual motifs, to create a consistent network identity and viewer experience across a variety of media technologies.

This commitment to The CW brand continues into the official social media pages for *The Originals*. The series is present across all major platforms, including Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Pinterest, and Tumblr. And whereas the program's main page does not allow any type of viewer engagement beyond watching videos, these sites facilitate a range of audience interaction with *The Originals*. Lurkers, such as myself, can simply look at content posted to the pages and read comments made by other visitors. More casual viewers can "like" content or follow the page itself, expressing their approval without commentary. More committed fans (and anti-fans[82]), on the other hand, can share and reblog content as well as reply to posts and others' comments, engaging in limited discussion with one another.

It is important to note, however, that one must be a registered user of each of these social media platforms in order to participate in ways other than lurking. As a result, there is no real anonymous interaction. Furthermore, while The CW seeks to connect all of these platforms through consistent network branding and similar content, these sites still create separate user communities with little to no cross-interaction. Nevertheless, my examination of the ways viewers engage with these unique manifestations of *The Originals* highlights certain trends.

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[82] The term "anti-fans" refers to viewers who strongly dislike a text or genre. For further explanation, see Jonathan Gray, "New Audiences, New Textualities: Anti-Fans and Non-Fans."

The series' official Facebook page is arguably the most active, and elicits the greatest amount of perceivable viewer engagement online. It boasts over six million likes, meaning six million Facebook users follow and receive updates from the site. Its posts a range of materials, from promo photos and clips to cast interviews and webisodes. Participants can like, comment on, and share posts, as well as like or reply to others' comments. Given these options, the degree to which audiences interact with the content arguably breaks down as expected, with more casual interactions in greater quantity than active ones. The site's posts generally receive views in the hundreds of thousands, likes in the tens of thousands, and comments in the hundreds. Comment threads for each of these posts, however, only show the top comments unless the user decides to explore further. These top comments usually represent either the most recent posts or those that receive the most likes from other users.

Comments on the Facebook page are generally short and informal, often relying on Internet language such as emojis and hashtags. As a result, notwithstanding the possibility of viewer-to-viewer discussion on the site, participants largely do not engage in in-depth conversations with one other. Rather, they use the space to remark upon their viewing experience of *The Originals*, expressing their approval or disappointment about the show—its characters, relationships, storylines, and actors. Communication between viewers, therefore, largely means simply agreeing or disagreeing with a stated opinion, either through the like or reply function. Furthermore, while the site acts as a forum for audience interaction with the series and other viewers, the producers of the page do not

engage with participants beyond posting the original content.[83] Like the official website for *The Originals*, the series' Facebook page principally seeks to promote network viewership and situate the program within The CW's transmedia brand. To this end, the site similarly features links to the Facebook pages for other network programs, including *The Flash, The 100*, and *America's Next Top Model*.

The official Twitter page is arguably the second most active of the series' social media sites, with over 800 thousand followers. As with the Facebook page, however, *The Originals*' official Twitter serves more as a brand marketing tool than a space for complex audience engagement. Posts consist of the same photo and video content seen on the Facebook page, as well as retweets—or reblogged posts made by other Twitter users—from cast and crew members or media outlets like *The Hollywood Reporter* and *Access Hollywood*. Also similar to Facebook, the site offers a range of interactions with its posts depending on the level of engagement viewers seek to commit. Users can "favorite" (the Twitter form of liking), retweet, embed, or reply to official tweets. While the site encourages viewers to retweet and reply to its posts, however, the official Twitter does not respond to the message of its fans in the same way. The page only features fan posts during its live tweeting of *The Originals* broadcasts, retweeting select fan reactions to the episode as well as posting its own. As a result, the Twitter page for *The Originals* primarily operates to maintain its network brand identity. To better understand how the audience uses the Twitter platform to engage with the series, therefore, future studies

[83] The site does directly interact with viewers, however, when it hosts a question and answer session with an actor from *The Originals*. For these occasions, participants post their questions on the page, after which the cast member uses the official Facebook account as a proxy to respond to the queries he or she chooses to answer.

might closely scrutinize the pages of users that follow the official page or make posts of their own, using series hashtags like #TheOriginals or #TeamKlaus.

While its Facebook and Twitter pages largely do not evoke manifestations of *The Originals* beyond its branded network affiliation, the program's official Instagram, Pinterest, and Tumblr provide a greater diversity of media engagement. Content posted to these sites includes not only some of the same promo photos present on the Facebook and Twitter pages but also an array of edited graphics. The official Pinterest board, for example, features a number of images of characters with quotes from the series. The Tumblr site, on the other hand, showcases GIFs—or animated images—of particular characters or scenes from the show. Most interestingly, the majority of the graphics present on the Tumblr page are fan-made. While the site does post some original GIFs, it predominantly reblogs those created by other Tumblr users. As a result, the viewer's engagement with *The Originals* via the Internet on these sites becomes less a calculated product of The CW and more an outlet for artistic expression and varied interpretation.

These sites, however, are relatively new—only beginning with the start of the series' second season in late 2014—and distribute to far fewer amounts of viewers. The Instagram and Pinterest pages, for example, only possess about 120,000 and 25,000 followers, respectively.[84] (These numbers, however, obviously do not account for those potential participants that lurk on the site but do not follow it as users.) Nevertheless, these particular social media platforms facilitate a significant diversity of media

[84] The official Tumblr page does not publish its number of followers.

interaction, partly because that diversity extends beyond the official pages into an even greater array of fan-operated sites.

Pinterest and Tumblr foster a thriving fan culture for *The Originals*. On Pinterest, viewers can poach images to create their own boards dedicated to the series (many of which have both more pins and followers than the official page). These fan-made boards also tend to post different kinds of content. While these users still pin series promo photos, edited graphics made by them or other fans feature more prominently than in official spaces. These fan boards also focus more heavily on the actors from *The Originals*—uploading paparazzi shots and personal photographs shared by the cast themselves, as well as images from magazines and conventions—thereby developing an active celebrity culture around the show and its stars.

Fan pages related to the series on Tumblr similarly participate in this sharing of fan materials and celebration of celebrity. Posts on this platform, however, often heavily consist of GIFs, focusing either on scenes, characters, or relationships. This attention to romantic pairings, or "ships," is perhaps most prevalent on Tumblr. Users frequently celebrate particular couples through graphics or GIFs, with some even creating entire blogs dedicated to a pairing. These couplings do not necessarily have to correspond to romances explicitly established on the show. They can also represent an imagined or slash[85] relationship between certain characters. Notwithstanding the creative freedom and diversity of interaction of these non-official spaces, Tumblr fanblogs also often refer to

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[85] The term "slash" refers to a genre of fan fiction that focuses on sexual relationships between fictional characters of the same sex. For an example, see Henry Jenkins, "'Welcome to Bisexuality, Captain Kirk': Slash and the Fan-Writing Community," in *Textual Poachers* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 185-222.

official sites. Fuck Yeah Originals, for example, embeds the official Twitter feed on its homepage and provides links to the series' website and Facebook page. These blogs also propose guidelines for shaping fan practice. Fuck Yeah Originals and others offer navigation links for the content of their sites in order to help viewers find posts related to specific characters, actors, episodes, or ships. Many blogs also present themselves as a space purely for fans, with creators identifying themselves as an "Original Groupie." Fuck Yeah Originals likewise refers to itself as a "hate-free" blog, while another advises that is has "no tolerance for hate or negativity." To further my investigation of *The Originals* on Tumblr, therefore, future studies might consider blogs curated by casual viewers or even anti-fans.

Manifestations of *The Originals* on these social platforms, however, remain primarily visual. Only a selection of Tumblr blogs uses the space for verbal expression and communication. Consequently, to find more discursive interactions with the series, I return to my initial Google results. The IMDb and TV.com pages for *The Originals*, for example, not only provide information about the series and its production, but also facilitate a range of viewer engagement. Users of both sites can rate as well as review the program. Interestingly, it is in these reviews where considerations of the series' Southern setting become more prevalent, as participants comment on the quality of the program's acting and plot, as well as the significance of its New Orleans locale. "This show charms because of the evolving power struggle between supernatural worlds and in a place no less mysterious & magical than NEW ORLEANS [*sic*]!" one poster writes on IMDb.

These user reviews also tend to situate *The Originals* against *The Vampire Diaries* (The CW, 2009-Present), the series that introduced the Mikaelsons. Many of the viewers that make these comparisons identify themselves as fans of both series, arguably to prove they possess the necessary knowledge and cultural capital to draw particular conclusions. Others distance themselves from *The Vampire Diaries*, finding it lacking in certain measures of quality. The majority of these reviews, however, hold *The Originals* in higher esteem than *The Vampire Diaries*, citing the value of its acting and storylines as potential reasons. Most interestingly, many of these user reviews also credit the series in this context for its comparative lack of romance plots. While *The Vampire Diaries* largely centers on a love triangle between its three protagonists, *The Originals* focuses on family bonds and power struggles. Viewers that choose to comment on this difference subsequently qualify *The Originals* as more original and "adult." This perceived maturity likewise makes the series acceptable programming for viewers that fall outside of the network's typical female audience. Several participants identify themselves as male in order to illustrate how *The Originals* excels in appealing to non-female (potentially read as more discerning) viewers. As one poster writes on TV.com, "i must admit, i'm a guy who hates vampire stories, probably because of the cheesy twilight stuff but this show really rocks [*sic*]."

This trend of comparing *The Originals* to *The Vampire Diaries* continues in message boards and discussion forums hosted on both IMDb and TV.com; however, these spaces also foster other kinds of engagement. IMDb features over 1000 different threads about the series, with a handful receiving replies in the hundreds. Topics range

from analyses of particular episodes and questions about the show's mythology to theories about future storylines and debates over certain characters. As a result, these discussion forums offer the most critical manifestations of *The Originals*, as viewers not only get to describe and reflect upon their viewing experience but also converse—sometimes at length—with other members of the audience.

CONCLUSION

As Hine remarks about her own case study, this taxonomy of references is not itself an ethnography. My research only begins to scratch the surface regarding how *The Originals* manifests online, and the various kinds of media engagement its digital presence engenders. Further studies must explore these references in greater depth, as well as consider offline types of meaning-making. Nevertheless, my preliminary project reveals not only the wealth of data available on the subject but also the similarities that exist across this range. Official sites for *The Originals* situate it as a transmedia product endemic to its network. Fan spaces, on the other hand, poach the series to facilitate celebrity culture, creative expression, and critical analysis. All of these mediated technologies, however, provide the opportunity for viewers of *The Originals* to establish a community—to digitally connect with one another. They also value various modes of engagement. Viewers maintain the option to interact with the media content to whatever degree they desire, from simply lurking to participating in an active comment thread.

Based on the nature of these trends, however, one might assume that neither the Southern locale of *The Originals* nor its use of vampires to negotiate particular Southern Gothic anxieties plays a prominent role in the audience's understanding of the series.

Maybe the New Orleans locale only provides an interesting backdrop to the drama. Or perhaps these highlighted viewers just do not make the connection consciously, demonstrating how the series is enjoyable and competent entertainment on a variety of levels. After all, this sample of the audience may not address the significance of class conflict on *The Originals*, but they do recognize and commend the representation of power struggles. Similarly, these viewers may not consider the cultural significance of the guilt expressed by the Mikaelsons, but they do sympathize with the characters because of it. Future studies, therefore, may not only continue to explore how the audience might expressly make sense of Southern vampire texts and their cultural implications but also the ways in which viewers use these texts to engage with the region—from the legacy of slavery to continued racial hostilities—from a distance.

Conclusion

In the previous three chapters, we have examined fundamental components of vampire texts set in the American South, from their negotiation of race and class structures to their mediation of collective guilt to the diversity of viewer engagement. Despite differences in focus and methodology, however, all three chapters ultimately seek to answer one overarching question: If "every age embraces the vampire it needs,"[86] like Nina Auerbach claims, then why does contemporary Western society need sympathetic Southern vampires? In other words, how do we begin to explain the cultural purpose of this regionalized media trend?

Each chapter addresses this question in some measure, if through the lens of their respective topics. With this conclusion, however, I connect multiple threads of analysis to offer a direct and cohesive response. Southern vampires perform a complex and at times paradoxical function, promoting feelings of nostalgia for an imagined South as well as engendering processes of critical self-reflection. And while the containment of our nation's haunted history to the American South is undeniably insufficient and at times problematic, it nevertheless allows Southern vampires to perform important cultural work—work that other "American" vampires do not undertake.

We might first surmise that contemporary society needs Southern vampires in order to confront the region's haunted history. This regionalized media trend explicitly engages with the Southern Gothic form—aesthetically, narratively, and thematically. As a result, Southern vampire texts also fulfill the subgenre's most fundamental purpose:

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[86] Nina Auerbach, *Our Vampires, Ourselves* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 145.

reviving a repressed past. Vampires prove particularly adept at performing this task. While traditional Southern Gothic texts commune with the past through representations of decay or feelings of nostalgia, as in the literary works of William Faulkner or Tennessee Williams, vampires provide a physical and immediate connection to history. Characters such as *True Blood*'s Bill Compton or *The Vampire Diaries'* Damon Salvatore, for example, are both former Confederate soldiers. Their uncanny existence in the present, therefore, transports the concerns of the nineteenth-century into the twenty-first, from the legacy of slavery to the trauma of Reconstruction.

As Michelle E. Moore argues in her article, "The Unsleeping Cabal: Faulkner's Fevered Vampires and the Other South," this temporal disruption unsettles certain assumptions about contemporary society. "Vampires would not seem to have a place in the modern world," she writes, "and their presence indicates the power of the past to contaminate contemporary modernity."[87] Therefore, Southern vampires not only revisit historical horrors about the American South, but also reveal how those horrors continue to influence the region in the present, from the persistence of race and class conflict to feelings of guilt. Despite Southern society's attempts to move into an era of modernity, vampires and their enduring presence prevent it from ever truly escaping the past.

During the Southern Renaissance of the twentieth century, Southern Gothic texts use this disruptive nature of the subgenre to reconcile with the abject legacy of the Civil War and the loss of regional identity. Moore, for example, describes how Faulkner's novel *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) depicts a character so obsessed with and haunted

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[87] Michelle E. Moore, " 'The Unsleeping Cabal': Faulkner's Fevered Vampires and the Other South," *The Faulkner Journal* 24, no. 2 (2009): 56.

by the antebellum lore of his family that he takes his own life in order to bring himself closer to that time. But what about *contemporary* American society necessitates the current surge in Southern vampire texts? Why do we still create—and even desire—such discomfiting media, 150 years after the Civil War?

The most obvious conclusion is that, to some extent, the nation continues to struggle with the history of the American South, or "the continuing pressures of the past upon the present,"[88] no matter how far removed. Consequently, Western society reasonably desires an outlet to explore these concerns and its feelings of dyphoria, and Southern vampires offer themselves as effective mediators. Furthermore, displacing these fears and anxieties onto fictional characters allows the nation to make sense of and come to terms with particular issues within a safe, circumscribed space. This function seems particularly relevant in light of current discourses about "post-race" America. As Michelle J. Smith argues, for example, the racial, sexual, and supernatural diversity of HBO's *True Blood* complicates the assumption of a fixed ideal of "Americanness" in need of defense. "This vampire narrative encourages us to desire difference," she explains, "not because of the thrill of transgression, but because, in postmodern fashion, racial and sexual boundaries demarcating 'self' and 'other' are no longer meaningfully upheld."[89]

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88 David Punter and Glennis Byron, "William Faulkner (1897-1962)," in *The Gothic* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 116.

89 Michelle J. Smith, "The postmodern vampire in 'post-race' America: HBO's *True Blood*," in *Open Graves, Open Minds: Representations of Vampires and the Undead from Enlightenment to the Present Day,* eds. Sam George and Bill Hughes (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), 207.

Another possible conclusion is that contemporary Western society feels a renewed sense of modern alienation, and vampire texts set in the American South provide a means of expression. Much like other Gothic texts, Southern vampire media interrogate the national symbolic. And in doing so, its vampires address American society's conflicted understanding of the national self and feelings of collective guilt. Scholars such as Leslie A. Fiedler, Teresa A. Goddu, Robert K. Martin, Eric Savoy, Renata R. Mautner Wasserman, and Renée L. Bergland all explore how the American Gothic mode exposes past horrors in order to challenge American national identity. The Gothic, Goddu argues, "by articulating the abject within American culture, threatens to reveal that America's dearest myths are haunted by history."[90] The American national self has no doubt experienced such challenges to its self-mythologization within the past 20 years, from the United States' involvement in several foreign wars to shocking instances of racial inequality and intergroup violence to the trauma of September 11, 2001. While these concerns are certainly not limited to the American South, Southern vampire texts' localization of certain fears nevertheless allows contemporary Western society to better engage with them. "These fictions are supernatural and fatalist because the fears are no longer locatable, no longer blamable," Christen Marina Thompson comments in her piece, "The Grotesque and the Post-Apocalyptic South: Ourselves and Our Ghosts." "We

[90] Teresa A. Goddu, "Haunted by History: Crèvecoeur's National Narrative and the Gothic," in *Gothic America: Narrative, History, and Nation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 14.

localize our fears to understand them and fit them somewhere, but they are most definitely not only Southern."[91]

However, while the American South arguably provides the "ideal Gothic space,"[92] as scholars David Punter and Glennis Byron posit, the containment of the nation's haunted history to the region is also exceedingly problematic. As Goddu points out, "while the Gothic reveals what haunts the nation's narratives, it can also work to coalesce those narratives. Like the abject, the Gothic serves as the ghost that both helps to run the machine of national identity and disrupts it."[93] And Goddu finds that the American literary tradition enacts this nationalistic function by using the "benighted South" as the repository for everything from which the nation seeks to disassociate.[94] Southern Gothic authors such as Edgar Allen Poe, therefore, come to bear all of the nation's burdens, including the legacy of slavery and feelings of collective guilt. In addition, to preserve the myths of the national self, this regional quarantine invariably casts the South as Other. "Thus," Evangelia Kindinger argues, "regionalism highlights and marginalizes regional communities as different and deviant. While the 'American' is defined through coherence and heteronormativity, the 'regional' is contested."[95] And, as she explains, the presence of vampires—Others themselves—only furthers this process. We might conclude,

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91 Christen Marina Thompson, "The Grotesque and the Post-Apocalyptic South: Ourselves and Our Ghosts," *Magazine Americana* (November 2012), http://www.americanpopularculture.com/archive/tv/grotesque.htm.

92 David Punter and Glennis Byron, "Anne Rice, *Interview with the Vampire* (1976)," in *The Gothic* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 244.

93 Teresa A. Goddu, "Introduction," in *Gothic America: Narrative, History, and Nation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 10.

94 Goddu, "Introduction," 4.

95 Evangelia Kindinger, "Reading Supernatural Fiction as Regional Fiction: of 'Vamps,' 'Supes,' and Places that 'Suck,'" *Kultur und Geschlecht* 1, no. 8 (2011): 17.

therefore, that contemporary Western society needs Southern vampire media in order to further as well as disrupt American nationalism. By similarly locating the Gothic's horrifying hauntings in the South, these texts potentially neutralize the threat to American national identity—inducing the same troubling effects that Goddu and others outline.

Southern vampire texts also run the risk of containing these anxieties to the fictional and the monstrous. While this narrative displacement arguably engenders a level of coherence, as Thompson asserts, it also serves as a method of evasion. In other words, by placing the blame for past transgressions on vampires, modern society can obfuscate its own culpability and avoid the resulting feelings of collective guilt. And as sociologists like Nyla R. Branscombe and Bertjan Doojse discover, this circumvention obstructs the impulse to seek methods of reparation and, consequently, the resolution of intergroup conflict. "The acceptance of collective guilt by those categorically associated with the perpetration of unjustified harm to others is not a trivial emotional matter," they argue. "In fact, in can be a rather costly emotion, although it may present new identity opportunities."[96] Contemporary American society, however, cannot benefit from these advantages if they use Southern vampires in order to avoid conducting the necessary self-examination.

While it is important to address these areas of contention, we do not want to undercut the important cultural work that this regionalized media trend does perform. As chapters one and two both conclude, Southern vampire texts provide a unique space through which to reconcile with the nation's haunted history. Vampires give the past not

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96 Nyla R. Branscombe and Bertjan Doosje, "Preface," in *Collective Guilt: International Perspectives* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), x.

only a voice but also the opportunity to atone for its transgressions. The past is not dead, but undead and capable of self-reflection. Moreover, by reviving that which was once repressed, these texts also demonstrate how the fears and anxieties of the past do not have to influence modern society. In the series finale of *True Blood*, for example, Bill realizes that he no longer belongs in the present; and in ending his immortal life, he presumably takes his antebellum attitudes with him. Perhaps Thompson summarizes it best:

> We are haunted by a past we did not create but cannot change, and the past is linked to us as the remnants of its creators, and thus we are each other. Our history and our decay are exposed alongside these seemingly supernatural monsters, and their absurd and haunted presence demands a world that is continually ending as culture and its modes are continually revolutionized—a world that we must fill with monsters and apocalypses so that we are forced to change the rules and find a new order of understanding.[97]

There will arguably never come a time when Western society does not need vampires. Undying and endlessly mutable, our fanged companions perfectly personify the anxieties of every generation. Vampires "can be everything we are," Auerbach writes, "while at the same time, they are fearful reminders of the infinite things we are not."[98] Contemporary society's current fascination with Southern vampires reveals how we continue to struggle with the history of the American South, national identity, and continued racial and social inequality. But it also shows how we are not defined by our past, and the ways in which we can successfully—if painstakingly—move into the future.

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97 Thompson, "The Grotesque and the Post-Apocalyptic South."

98 Auerbach, *Our Vampires, Ourselves*, 6.

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